

Those Lacking Spines

Organization VI

Complete

Kingdom Hearts



Copyright Page

This book was automatically created by [FLAG](#) on October 16th, 2013, based on content retrieved from <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2903858/>.

The content in this book is copyrighted by Organization VI or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved except where explicitly stated otherwise.

This story was first published on April 20th, 2006, and was last updated on September 18th, 2008.

Any and all feedback is greatly appreciated - please email any bugs, problems, feature requests etc. to flag@erayd.net.

Table of Contents

Summary

1. If He Wasn't Bishonen
2. Smells Like Teenage Wasteland
3. Since You've Been Gone I'm Not Okay
4. The Author Must've Spent
5. Anything But Ordinary
6. Rainy Day Woman No 12 and 35
7. Came Out of a Crazy Mind
8. Except For Me and My Monkey
9. Crawling In My Skin
10. Princes of the Universe
11. Hunka Hunka Burnin' Love
12. March of the Black Queen
13. Because We're Not Yet Dead

Summary

Immune to a suspicious parasite by merit of their manly looks, Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus set out on a journey to save the rest of Organization XIII from the biggest nightmare of all: stupid fanfiction.

If He Wasn't Bishonen

THOSE LACKING SPINES

---A Parody---

by Gexegee (of Organization VI)

A/N: (UPDATE: 5-16-10) Been a while, hasn't it, guys? In all my OCDness I'm trying to go back through and fix these chapters so that the paragraph breaks that FF.N so rudely removed will be back in the story.

In the meantime of my absence however, this story's gotten a lot of attention—even a TV Tropes page. Can I just say two things; WOW and THANK YOU? I'm glad my story continues to make people laugh, even a few years later!

Incidentally, I just about died when it turned out Zexion's Other really was an eight year old.

In any case, thanks for the love and enjoy the paragraph breaks!

- Gexegee

Chapter One: If He Wasn't Bishounen, Would You Be So Into Him?

There was nothing to do in The World That Never Was.

Dark City, for all the foreboding architecture, neon alien symbols and fanboyish excitement to be found in it, was surprisingly lacking of interesting things to do. Sure, the place was cool enough to look at, but the local economy was learning the hard way that it's a bad idea to build an entire city without so much as an outlet mall.

Blame flew in all directions—why did the original six members of the Organization pick the most far-off, destitute, backwater world in (non)existence for their fortress? Why did they erect a city of Nobodies that didn't have so much as a bowling alley, a

nightclub or a video arcade? Did they really plan to do nothing but plot domination of the worlds and sit in their castle all day, brooding and whining about how they didn't have any hearts, boo hoo, woe is them?

Whatever the case, there was really very little that could draw the members of Organization XIII out into the city they'd built for any reason whatsoever (except, of course, to film pretentious cut scenes to give birth to a sweeping wave of fan spooge prior to the release of the next game in the series).

Even within the castle, it was often difficult to find something to do. There were only so many hours and days you could spend locked in your private quarters, angsting and staring at Kingdom Hearts out the window or muttering, "I do believe in my own existence! I do believe in my own existence! I do, I do!" For morale's sake, the Organization had done their best to remedy the situation a few years back, but their efforts never really amounted to anything. The satellite channels and DSL connections from Twilight Town were known to periodically crap out, and by the time any mortal pizza guy arrived--having been devoured by Heartless and resurrected as a Dusk-- the cheese was always cold. (It is actually a little known fact that Demyx, the Organization's Number Nine, began as a lowly pizza boy).

Xaldin lamented this fact, sitting in his room (dramatically nicknamed the Nonentity's Library) reading a blank-covered volume of short fiction one dreary, nonexistent morning. He'd thought he might run out that day and menace some innocent world inhabitants for fun, but Xemnas had him holding down the fort—nothing left to do but go through the library and look for something to read besides the redundant books full of blank verse.

Allow the narrator to take a brief interlude into the present tense so that I may introduce you to Xaldin. He is the esteemed Number Three of the Organization, and his nickname is "The Whirlwind Lancer". He wields six spears in combat and possesses the element of wind, and also controls the ranks of the Dragoon Nobodies. He is easily recognized by his muscular frame, his sharp blue eyes, his braids (don't ever call them dreadlocks—do you know what you have to do to your hair to get dreadlocks?), but most people instead choose to pick him out by his sideburns, which are rumored to think and act independently of him.

The narrator feels so inclined as to introduce him to you because for some reason, either due to sheer coincidence or the incorrect belief that obvious male features and the lack of wispy bishounen girl hair make a person "ugly", Xaldin is something of a nonentity in his own fandom. The first person to dig up ten stories that star or even importantly mention Number Three will win a free sandwich of their choice at participating Subway restaurants.

Search your feelings; you know it to be true. Except for the Subway thing. No seriously, back off, the narrator ain't buying you lunch, you deadbeat.

"The narrator will kindly get on with things?" Xaldin glanced up from his book, cutting in from the other side of the fourth wall.

Yes. The narrator apologizes.

After several hours of in-depth study of the book he'd picked out for the day, and dreading the next time there would be a stupid "nothing" reference to something in the prose, Xaldin was relieved to hear someone arriving through the gateways upstairs. He set the book on a nearby table and stepped through the portal, reappearing in the Proof of Existence room just in time to catch Number Seven, Saïx on his way back in from somewhere.

"Interesting mission?" Xaldin asked, noticing a series of long claw marks on the sleeves of Saïx's coat.

"Heartless. Such nuisances," Saïx sneered, repairing his coat with a few waves of a gloved hand. "Superior sent Roxas and me to scout out Hollow Bastion to see what those loathsome creatures are doing, mobilized around the Villain's Vale." He swept a stray piece of his purple hair back behind his ear.

Xaldin looked intrigued. "And they snuck up on you?"

"In my defense, I'd never seen the type before," Saïx replied. "Smaller, faster, nastier bites," holding up one of his hands to show the hole punched clean through his glove. "One of them wounded me."

"Where is Roxas?" Xaldin asked him.

"I'm not sure. He came back before I did," Saïx turned towards the stairs. "Now if you'll excuse me, I must report to the Superior."

Filing away the conversation, which would no doubt be crucial to the plot later on, Xaldin made his way down a few floors to the Lounge of the Non-Existent.

The Lounge seemed the place to be this particular morning, Xaldin noted, watching the activity around him as he started up the cycle on the Coffeemaker of Nada. Number Twelve, Larxene sat on a stool at the counter, filing her nails and

pretending not to listen to the rally of insults flying between Demyx and Luxord, playing cards at the table.

"You are *totally* cheating," Demyx complained, throwing his cards down suddenly. "There's no way you could be beating me so bad!"

"Go Fish is my game," Number Ten, Luxord shrugged, casually setting down another set of pairs.

"He's the Gambler of Fate, stupid, everything's his game," Larxene snickered cattily from behind them.

"Hey—don't take his side!" Demyx protested, recovering his cards nonetheless.

"I'm not. I'm just running some commentary," she shrugged.

"Well, uh... don't!"

"And who are you to order it?"

"Higher rank than you," Demyx pointed out.

"Both of you shut up," Luxord said. "Do you have any fours, Number Nine?"

"Aw, no WAY!" Demyx threw down a few cards, crossing his arms in a pout. "Why did I agree to play with you?"

"You're a dumbass," Larxene offered.

"Try not to undermine authority while I'm standing right here, Number Twelve," Xaldin said suddenly, pouring himself a cup of coffee and taking it black—LIKE HIS SOUL.

Rather, that should say "cream and two sugars". LIKE HIS SOUL. The narrator emphasizes that the lack of a heart does not turn everyone into a whiny, angsty, wrist-cutting loser.

"Screw this-- Where'd Roxas skip off to?" Larxene sniffed, "I can push him around and he can't complain."

"He was in here a minute ago getting a snack, but he said he had something to do this afternoon," Demyx asked. "He's probably with Axel."

"OH HO HO!" Larxene burst out giggling. "He's *with* Axel?"

"Yes—they got the PS2 working again yesterday," Demyx nodded, very sure of himself as Luxord and Xaldin eyed their female colleague, curious at her outburst.

"I'll find him, if you like," Xaldin offered. "I need something to occupy my time anyway."

"Yeah? Send him on in here when you find him," Luxord waved as Xaldin turned to leave. "I'm on a roll fleecing stupid young people today."

Standing outside the Lounge as though ready to enter was the hulking, muscular form of the Organization's Number Five, Lexaeus. A man of tremendous stature and strength (once again, not to be confused with "ugly") with wiry reddish-brown hair, blue eyes and a strong jaw line, he is known as "The Silent Hero" and wields a tremendous tomahawk as well as the element of earth. There is an idiotic tendency to portray Lexaeus as a big dolt. This is perhaps due to his size or his tendency to stay silent in large group settings, but it is, in fact, an incorrect assumption—he is rather fond of the occasional obscure brick of a Russian novel, and his silence only makes him a better listener. He is notable as a very good source of information regarding goings-on within the Organization.

Once again, the narrator feels inclined to tell you this because nobody in the world seems to know who poor Lexaeus is or how to properly introduce him—unless, of course, he is portrayed to be having sex with his close associate Number Six, Zexion. Lexaeus looks shamefully upon his fan fiction portrayal and asks the narrator not to discuss it further.

"Xaldin," he said, nodding respectfully. "Good afternoon."

"Afternoon? Is it really?" Xaldin replied. The sky was always dark outside, hell if he knew how to tell.

"I am not sure. It feels like an afternoon," Lexaeus shrugged.

"Ah, yes. How are you today, my friend? Anything of note going on?"

"Not particularly," he replied. "I was looking for Vexen—I wanted to hear about the results of his last experiment. Rumor has it he's discovered a new type of Heartless."

Xaldin raised an eyebrow. "Really? Odd, I didn't know he was looking into anything like that."

"Yes, it seems several of the Dusks were found to have unique injuries last time they came back from patrol. Vexen studied the wounds and Zexion says he was able to isolate the presence a new breed from them. Superior wants me to check on his results," Lexaeus nodded.

"Intriguing. Saix said he encountered a new breed on patrol today," Xaldin told him. "Perhaps they are the same? Presenting the information together may prove useful."

"That's a good idea. Perhaps it will get the main plot of the story going too," Lexaeus suggested. "Let's go."

To make a long story shorter, they found Vexen in his laboratory in the lower levels of the castle.

Vexen is the third of our trio of heroes—he has long dirty blond hair, green eyes, and is over the age of thirty, which makes him an "old geezer" in the eyes of our ageist culture. He is Number Four in the Organization, "The Chilly Academic", with control over the element of ice and a pretty bitchin' shield he can use for attacks.

In Vexen's defense, it is not his fault he's so cranky. Popular opinion places him as a pissy, bitching white trash intellectual with a two-foot-stick up his ass and an odd penchant for child molestation.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Vexen stood from his desk and greeted them with a polite bow.

"Afternoon, actually," Xaldin corrected. "The sky is off today, it seems."

"Is it really? Hm."

"We came to see about your latest research, Number Four," Lexaeus explained.

"Oh, yes! I just finished drawing up a chart for such an explanation," Vexen looked giddy all of a sudden, rushing over to his desk and lifting up a series of complicated notes and diagrams detailing his research. "I've got a torrent of exposition all ready for you."

"Do you hear that?" Xaldin eyed the readers. "Pay attention. This is important."

Clearing his throat, Vexen held up an image of a pathetic, shriveled little Heartless that looked more like a ghostly worm than anything. "This, gentlemen, is the new species in its most basic form."

"Those are the things that almost kicked Saix's ass?" Xaldin's eyes widened considerably. "That little worm?"

"Ah, but it has much more bite than bark," Vexen grinned. "In any case, this new species is unique in that they seem to affect a part of the body other than the heart. From my research, it's possible to ascertain that they are programmed to seek out and eliminate the, uh..."

There was a short pause. He bobbed his head in an obvious downward motion.

"You know."

"The 'you know'?" Xaldin bobbed his head as well.

"The 'that'?" Lexaeus queried.

"No, no, not *that*," Vexen waved his hands around in a circular motion. "The... you know."

"Oh," Xaldin and Lexaeus said quietly.

"I call this species the Gutless."

"That's an interesting name," Lexaeus commented. "If they target the... you know."

"Yes, I was going to call them the Nutless, but Disney put their foot down," Vexen sighed. "Some nonsense about not scaring the children and lawsuits, something about a VHS cover or something. But never mind all that. They're rather interesting though, don't you think? I can only imagine why our enemies in the Heartless would send out such a creature."

"You don't suppose there's a separate kingdom for..." Xaldin drifted off, thankfully before anybody got any terrible ideas.

The narrator said BEFORE anybody got any terrible ideas- **STOP THAT**

GIGGLING AND CLOSE YOUR WORD PROCESSOR, RIGHT NOW.

THANK YOU.

"You said that Saïx ran into a new species of Heartless today?" Lexaeus reminded Xaldin with a nudge in the shoulder.

"Oh yes. Perhaps the Heartless are employing this new species into battle already—Saïx said he and Roxas ran into a large group of them in Hollow Bastion today," Xaldin said. "He was wounded in the hand by one of them."

"Was he?" Vexen looked excited suddenly. "Do you suppose he's already healed the wound? I'd like to have a look at it to add the notes to my research."

"I haven't the slightest idea," Xaldin shook his head. "We ought to check, though, and ask Roxas—you know how Saïx gets in battle. Roxas will have gotten a better look at them."

"After this are we done jumping around from floor to floor?" Lexaeus asked. "I'm quite hoping we'll get to the main plot one of these paragraphs."

Muffled noises from within the portal to Saïx's chamber should have tipped off our triumphant trio that something was terribly wrong inside, but there wasn't any other bad sign until Lexaeus knocked on the side of the portal and called inside, "Saïx, are you in?"

There was no response.

"He had gone to see Superior a while ago," Xaldin raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps he isn't back yet."

"Come in!" Saïx's voice fluttered through the portal.

"Wait a minute—'fluttered'?" Vexen made a face. "What an interesting verb to use in conjunction with our stoic, somewhat psychotic comrade."

Vexen would find himself a fair bit more disturbed when the trio entered Saïx's room to find that Number Seven had been busy doing a little redecorating in the unlikely twenty minutes since Xaldin had last seen him. A fresh coat of cheerful lavender paint had been haphazardly flung all over previously white walls, and

colorful sun catchers in the shape of stars and moons hung from the ceiling on pink string. Throw pillows were tossed around piles of fluffy blankets, and cherry-flavored incense wafted across the room in tendrils of smoke.

Saïx himself was kneeling in front of a mirror, whistling "Zip-Ah-Dee-Doo-Dah" and curling his hair. "Hello fellows!" he called in a chipper voice, waving with his other hand. "How does this evening see you?"

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus took a moment to survey this scene and replace their wide-open dropped jaws.

"Saïx, we were..." Xaldin drifted off. "... Just coming to ask about that new Heartless you found."

"Oh, those silly old things? No matter no matter!" Saïx giggled, tossing his hand. "They were sooooo mean! Like oh my GOD. I didn't think Roxy and I were gonna get out! They were all, shape-shifty and stuff!"

"...'like oh my God'?" Xaldin murmured.

"...'Roxy'?" Lexaeus echoed.

"Shape-shifting! *Really?*" Vexen pulled out a notebook to write that down.

"Yeah, they could like... turn into little teathy-guys an' stuff," Saïx began to hum again, fluffing up his hair and standing up to twirl around in circles in front of the mirror. "Somebody's gorgeous!"

Near the doorway, Vexen was still furiously taking notes as Xaldin and Lexaeus eyed each other.

"Something very strange is going on," Lexaeus commented. "He wasn't like this earlier, Xaldin, was he?"

"No," Xaldin looked puzzled. "I think perhaps Marluxia's been dumping his dead herbs into the water again."

"Maybe he's not feeling well from his encounter with the Heartless earlier," Lexaeus suggested.

"Saïx," Vexen said suddenly, "I wonder if I might have a look at your wound from today?"

"Oh yeah!" Saïx squeaked, waltzing over and pulling off his glove. "I was gonna heal it up earlier but it was like, really itching—so I decided to wait until later to do it. Lookit the rash! Isn't it like totally weird?"

Saïx's hand was host to a small, pink, heart-shaped rash centered by the fang marks Xaldin had noticed earlier. The wound hadn't quite closed yet, very unusual for a Nobody, but even more unusual was how warm to the touch Number Seven's skin felt.

Vexen glanced at his notes concernedly, and then up at Saïx. "Saïx, you said it's been itchy? And this was from one of those new Heartless?"

"Mhmm," Saïx pursed his lips and nodded. "Roxy and I got attacked earlier while we were on patrol. I got bitten in the hands and, um... I think Roxy got nicked in the ankle—mean little buggers! Looked like little worms but then they got these big teeth..."

Vexen closed his notebook suddenly. "Ah. Thank you, Saïx. That's all I need—Lexaeus, Xaldin, if you will follow me back out into the Proof?"

"Oh my GOD, you guys should totally stick around!" Saïx hopped up and down suddenly. "I'm gonna make some tea and cookies and we can sit around in a circle with all my new pillows and talk about our feelings! I'm telling you, there's this beautiful little flutter in the place where my heart would be lately... I think I'm in LOOOOVE!"

"The tea sounds lovely, Saïx, but we're a bit busy this afternoon," Xaldin told him as he ducked through the portal.

"Afternoon? Is it really?" Saïx cocked his head.

"Er... yes. Maybe some other time?" Lexaeus followed the others out.

"That was the most terrifying thing I've ever seen," Lexaeus said simply once they had all reappeared.

"I can't believe it... I thought the data was just a fluke, but it looks like I was right," Vexen's face was a mix between triumph and horror.

"Did you leave something out of the exposition, Vexen?" Xaldin asked crossly.

"Something, perhaps, involving *permanent side-effects*?"

"It sounded impossible—a few of my reports found the presence of some kind of... hmm... I guess you could most easily call it a 'virus' or a 'parasite'—some sort of organism in the saliva of the Gutless," Vexen explained. "The Gutless are so weak it's difficult to imagine anyone being overtaken by them, resulting in the loss of... you know."

"So they evolved a parasite to pass onto their victims instead?" Lexaeus's pupils got very small.

"Yes—data suggests that this parasite slowly inhibits the function of... you know, rendering the victim into a state I will colloquially refer to as '*ukefication*'," Vexen announced. "This state wipes the personality and demeanor of a victim completely clean, replacing it with one of complete and utter submission. This causes the victim to become weak, fluffy, emotional and utterly incapable of standing up for themselves, wanting only to be in contact with others to further spread the epidemic. It is quite frankly disgusting."

"This sounds like the plot of a really horrible pornography," Xaldin noted. "So Saïx has the parasite—and he's lost his... you know. That would explain the giggling and the sissy redecorating. The Saïx we recruited is stoic, collected, and mildly psychopathic with a sadistic twist."

"Poor Saïx," Lexaeus looked horrified at the mere thought, as the group began a brisk walk towards the top of the room and the path to Xemnas' chamber. "We must alert the Superior before it spreads."

"Just... how contagious is it?" Xaldin asked all of a sudden.

Vexen thought about it for a moment, and made an expression of dawning realization. "In a sealed wound I wouldn't think it too bad... but Saïx's wound has been open all day... Has he been around any of the others?"

"He went to see Xemnas earlier," Xaldin said with concern. "And he was with Roxas when the attack occurred... Roxas was in the Lounge earlier and he's with Axel now."

"More immediately, perhaps, *we* were just in contact with Saïx," Lexaeus said with dawning terror.

There was a short pause.

"We split up," Xaldin finally announced. "Vexen, you go find Roxas and check the upper levels to make sure those upstairs haven't been affected. Lexaeus, you head to the Lounge. I'll go speak with the Superior. Meet me there when you've finished and we'll discuss what we're to do."

Finding Roxas and Axel's rooms both empty, Vexen wandered around the floor until he came to Marluxia's chambers (formally known as The Conservatory Where Nothing Grows). "Marluxia—there's been an incident," he called as he brushed a few vines and flowers out of his way into the doorway. "There's... oh dear."

Vexen always did hate coming in here. The Organization members were allowed to decorate their rooms however they liked—Xaldin's was a sophisticated library, Lexaeus's was a gym, and Vexen's was an underground laboratory. Marluxia had chosen to turn his into a fabulous garden, with giant vines and colorful flowers growing in all corners.

Not to mention Marluxia was a pretentious, conniving, underhanded fruitcake.

Marluxia was in the process of caring for a giant pink orchid in the center of the room, lovingly stroking it and talking to it in a sweet tone. "Yes, we are thirsty today, my little flower, aren't we? Yes, let Daddy give you some water..." He kissed its petals and tipped a pink watering can around the flower's base, sprouting up from cracks in the stone floor. "We are such a healthy little flower, aren't we? Yes, precious, beautiful... Grow up big and beautiful for Daddy... Mmm, precious, your pollen is growing so fragrant... I just love the scent of your beautiful pollen... Good morning, Vexen. Out to let a little light on your shriveled, lifeless complexion?"

"Afternoon," Vexen corrected. "And no."

Marluxia flipped his ash-brown hair out of his face and frowned. "Is it really? Hmm. I've wasted half the day away planting seeds and watering one little precious. How the time flies."

"Have you been feeling... all right today?" Vexen eyed the circumstances he had found Number Eleven in, but promptly remembered, "Then again I suppose this isn't really out of the ordinary for you."

"Oh, how droll you are," Marluxia tossed his head, crossing his arms. "To each his own. Some people like to give life to beauty, others like to lock themselves in stuffy basements playing mad scientist and talking to test tubes."

"I would rather be in a stuffy basement than surrounded by such vibrant symbols of femininity," Vexen sneered, somewhat ironically since the narrator believes if you squint at him in the right light, he looks like Galadriel from Lord of the Rings. "And in any case, straighten up. There's been an incident downstairs."

"Mmm, has there?" Marluxia raised an eyebrow. "Has Larxene finally had her way with the basta... oh, never mind."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, nothing, don't mind me. What sort of incident?" Marluxia pressed, taking the time to water a few more of the flowers in his garden. "Oh dear, were you in charge of positioning guards today? Shall I run for my life?"

"I need to know if you've looked up from your flowers long enough to see Saïx or Roxas today," Vexen said shortly.

"I see Saïx and Roxas every day," Marluxia smiled.

"You know what I mean, you preening, uppity primadonna."

"Only briefly. Roxas and Axel were playing their atrocious 'video games' again, and making a hell of a lot of noise. My lilies were starting to wilt from the din."

Vexen marveled at Marluxia's ability to make absolutely anything sound like a terrible innuendo. He was truly the master. "Where are they now?"

"I don't know," Marluxia huffed. "As I said, I've been in here all day planting seeds and watering. These beauties don't grow this lovely on their own, you know."

"... Right."

"I heard some voices and an odd noise from Axel's room earlier," Marluxia shrugged. "That is, I think I did. Who could tell over that awful game?"

"I see. Well, do us all a favor and stay in here for the time being, while Number Three, Five and I look into this incident," Vexen said. "And that is a command."

"Very well," Marluxia nodded crisply, turning back around to water more plants. "Do watch yourself on the way out. My man eaters haven't been fed yet."

Dammit. He had to be doing that on purpose. He HAD to be.

The card game had been all but abandoned by the time Lexaeus reached the Lounge. He was, unfortunately, too late to prevent the atrocity he walked in on.

Suffice to say, the earlier insult war brewing between Luxord, Demyx and Larxene was nowhere to be seen. Larxene, in fact, was nowhere to be seen, but it was difficult to miss Luxord and Demyx sprawled out on the floor in the throes of a loving embrace. Fully clothed, you sick, twisted little freakmonkeys.

"I just... I just feel so... so... safe with you."

"Yes... yes, I've... I've always wanted somebody to love..."

"I know... I know the feeling."

"Touch me."

"Yes..."

"Touch my face and tell me I exist."

"You exist..."

"Where do I exist?"

"In my... HEART..."

"We don't *have* hearts," Lexaeus protested, looking on the verge of projectile vomiting.

"*Yes we do!*" Demyx screamed. "*I have a heart-* and it belongs to LUXORD!"

"And my heart belongs to DEMYX!" Luxord cried triumphantly.

"This is disgusting. I'm going to put a stop to this right now," Lexaeus stepped forward to deal with his comrades.

"He's going to separate us, Luxord!" Demyx wailed.

"I wouldn't bet on it!" Luxord looked for a moment like he was going to stand up and do something about the infringement on Demyx and his parasitic psycho "love", but instead hugged the younger Nobody closer and cuddled him.

Lexaeus promptly fixed it, however, by grabbing Demyx by the back of the coat and yanking him away, hanging him on a coat rack and out of commission while he dealt with the sobbing, sensitive Luxord.

"Don't take him away from me! I LOVE HIM!" Luxord wailed pathetically, clinging to Lexaeus's sleeve and sobbing like a six-year-old girl.

"I LOVE YOU TOO, LUXORD!" Demyx shrieked, reaching out his hand. "Tell me you'll never leave me!"

"I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU!"

Mercifully, Lexaeus knocked Luxord unconscious and promptly stuffed his body in an upright cabinet, latching the door with a spatula.

"You can't do this, Lexaeus!" Demyx screeched, kicking and fighting to loose himself from the coat rack. "You can't separate true love!"

"You don't know how stupid and disgusting what you're saying is, Demyx," Lexaeus shook his head and announced, "And for the time being, I am appointing myself your Mercy Angel. I will do whatever it takes to keep you from humiliating yourself to the point of suicide once we figure out how to recover your... you know."

"MEANIE!" Demyx crossed his arms and sobbed.

"I won't bother asking if the two of you are feeling all right," Lexaeus was busy tearing a dishtowel into a strip and tying Demyx's hands with it to prevent his escaping and letting Luxord out. "Roxas was in here earlier, then?"

"Yes, and he would **RESPECT OUR LOVE!**"

"That means he must have the parasite too, then, to have spread it to the two of you," Lexaeus said mostly to himself. "It didn't seem to take long at all..." He turned his thoughts to himself, assessing how he felt—no different than normal—certainly not as though he was suffering the malfunction of his... you know. Did the parasite really kick in so suddenly, out of the blue?

"What happened to Larxene?" he asked Demyx a moment later, shaking away the troubling thoughts.

"I don't know! I wasn't paying attention—I was too busy looking for someone to watch over me..." Demyx sighed miserably. "I... I was thinking..."

"Yes?"

"Please! P-please, Lexaeus... I beg of you... I... I just need somebody to prove I exist... show me they love me... please..."

"You are barking up the wrong tree entirely, Number Nine," Lexaeus patted him on the head. "You stay here and don't move. We shall fix you."

Lexaeus was interrupted by the door to the Lounge swinging open and a shadowy figure stumbling out of the hallway.

"Lexaeus!"

Zexion was sporting black eyeliner and a set of Hot Topic spiked wristbands as he held out his arms and stepped towards the giant. "Lexaeus! I... I have a confession..."

"Oh hell."

"HE'S MINE, YOU BITCH!" Demyx squealed.

"No! NO! He promised he loved **me**!" Zexion threw himself forward, missing Lexaeus by a hair as he stepped backwards abruptly and summoned his tomahawk. "Lexaeus! I, well... What's the worst that I can say? Things are better if I stay..."

"SO LONG AND GOODNIGHT!" Demyx contributed to the vicious potshot, much to the narrator's enjoyment.

"So long... and goodnight... Unless you can show me I exist, I'm going to..." Zexion drifted off overdramatically, staring at the wall in a fairly transcendent manner. "... **End it.**"

"I don't think so, Number Six," Lexaeus said reasonably. "You are not yourself."

"Your tomahawk is so..." Zexion zoned out on it and began to drool a bit. "... shiny... and... and colorful... and... I want to touch it..."

"Thank you. But I don't think so," Lexaeus supported the weapon on his shoulder, noting how Zexion seemed unwilling to take his eyes off it and concentrate on the manner at hand. Perhaps there was a second wave of parasites known as the Brainless?

"I've always... always needed somebody to show me the way..." Zexion murmured stupidly.

"Me... me too!" Demyx's eyes watered.

"Really?" Zexion's eyes got big and watery as he eyed his comrade hanging from the wall. "That's so... so..."

"Beautiful..." Demyx drifted off with a moronic grin.

"I apologize for this, but I can't stand to hear anymore of your cornball dialogue," Lexaeus took the opportunity while Zexion was turned and stepped forward, mercilessly kicking the smaller man away from him. Zexion caught himself on the coat hook that Demyx dangled from, ripping it out of the wall and freeing the young man to untie his hands and make his own effort at winning Lexaeus's lack of a heart.

"Well that didn't work as planned," Lexaeus said to no one in particular, a hint of alarm in his voice.

"DOMINATE MEEEE!" the others shrieked together.

They leapt for him simultaneously, but Lexaeus evaded, smacking their heads together to knock them both unconscious and summoning a portal to make a break for it in.

"This is really turning out to be one of those days," Lexaeus grumbled.

"Yes, sir. I understand how it feels to lack a heart and be without true emotions, in anything more than the intellectual sense. After all I too, am a Nobody—I've been around from the beginning and have quite a lot of experience in the matter. I also understand our desperation to restore ourselves to complete forms, necessitating the entire plot involving Kingdom Hearts and our tracking and trailing of the Heartless. However..."

Xaldin tucked his braids behind his ears and glared disapprovingly at Xemnas. "I don't think it is necessary, nor is it productive, for you to do this."

"Come, Xaldin. Bask in the darkness with me. Together, we can find it... the light..." Xemnas said broodingly over the sparkling flames of at least forty-three votive candles laid all over his throne. He lay in a sprawling heap on the ground,

staring up at his subordinate with melancholy, tearful orange eyes and surrounded by books upon books of gothic haiku he'd seemingly written within the last half hour.

"I'm going to have to decline your gracious offer, Superior," Xaldin took a few steps back in case the ailing Nobody would attempt to cling to his leg. "And Xigbar, you really shouldn't be encouraging him."

"I am so totally numb," Xigbar murmured with a faint, stupid smile on his face, similarly laid out next to Xemnas and waving his hands in the air above him. "Everything is so... bleak, y'know? I need somethin' to make me feel... whooooooooole..."

"I do too..." Xemnas whispered, staring at his second with a plastered grin.

"If the two of you could kindly refrain from that before I get the hell out of here, that would be very courteous," Xaldin commented.

"You're so *cruel*, Xaldin..." Xigbar whimpered. "I... I don't think I get enough cruelty, man..."

"Well, seeing as both Number One and Number Two are out of commission, I suppose that puts me in charge, doesn't it?" Xaldin said pleasantly to his companions. "Wait—what am I asking you for? You two are brainless vegetables."

"TALK DIRTY TO ME! TELL ME I'M A SLUT!" Xemnas screamed desperately.

"I can't tell you how happy I am that I don't have to take orders from you anymore," Xaldin sighed with relief.

"Xaldin? Oh hell. Here too?" Lexaeus appeared on the other side of the room from a portal, eyeing the candles, the poetry, and the sad state of affairs in the upper chain of the Organization's command. "Luxord, Demyx and Zexion have all been infected. I couldn't find Larxene and she wasn't in her chambers."

"Axel and Roxas are gone too," Vexen arrived from his own portal, carrying a stack of notes that he'd just been down to his lab to fetch. "Marluxia's no more of a blithering, simpering cupcake than usual, it seems."

"This is a sorry, sickening state of affairs, gentlemen," Xaldin said, disdain lacing his voice. "This could very well be the greatest threat our Organization has ever suffered... left unchecked, this parasite will destroy us from within and leave us

nothing but angsty, moping, wrist-cutting loser boys."

"What about us, though?" Lexaeus asked gravely. "We were exposed to it too, multiple times now. Are we going to end up like them?"

"Yes, I have looked into that, actually..." Vexen pulled out his stack of notes and shuffled through them. "While I was in Roxas's room, I took a swabbing of the controller on his PS2 and made a culture of the parasite particles. I went down to my laboratory and analyzed it, and was able to pick up some new data from the computer."

"Out with it, then," Xaldin urged him.

"It seems that these Gutless are not Heartless at all. They are an entirely new species that originate from a series of worlds approximately here," Vexen held up a world map and circled his finger around a huge, blank area beyond any explored regions. "I got into the DSL and did a little research on this area—it seems this is the area surrounding the legendary Fandom Hearts."

"Fandom Hearts?" Lexaeus echoed. "I thought that place was only a myth."

"No, it seems to be true. Out there in the universe somewhere there is an alternate dimension exactly like, and yet, extremely different than our own," Vexen went on. "There are hundreds, if not thousands of doubles and multiples of people in this universe on the other side of Fandom Hearts. The Gutless seem to be congregating around Fandom Hearts, as though they are mobilizing to conquer it much as the Heartless are planning in our own dimension. They are attracted to the worlds on the other side of Fandom Hearts."

"Worlds on the other side?" Xaldin asked.

"Yes. There are countless of them, and multiple versions of the people in our own, real universe are invoked there every time a new one is created. However, it seems the Gutless are aiming to destroy Fandom Hearts... by affecting the people within our universe."

"So basically, there's a lot of copies of our universe being invoked, and the Gutless keep screwing them up by turning us into sobbing wussies," Xaldin translated.

"Precisely. In short, we three are immune to the Gutless," Vexen concluded.

"How do you figure?" Lexaeus raised an eyebrow.

"Statistics," Vexen lifted another sheet of printouts and passed a piece of paper to both Xaldin and Lexaeus. "This is data concerning how many times each of the three of us has been obviously invoked in one of the alternate worlds of Fandom Hearts. It covers nearly ten thousand alternate worlds. I was invoked in a shoddy 0.0014 percent of them."

"0.0014 percent? Out of *ten thousand*?" Lexaeus sounded disbelieving. "I was only invoked in 0.0005 percent of them. Xaldin?"

Xaldin looked extremely insulted at his paltry 0.0004 percent appearance rate. "We hardly appear at all."

"Indeed. It is my hypothesis that the Gutless don't know we exist, and therefore, we are immune to them," Vexen looked, for lack of a better word, vexed. "Under the circumstances, I am extremely grateful."

Lexaeus was inclined to agree. "What do you suppose happened to Larxene, Roxas and Axel?"

"I would imagine Larxene is also immune to them, seeing as she has no... you know. I don't have a clue where she could have run off to," Vexen guessed. "As for Roxas and Axel, I don't know. It is my hope that Axel, at least, was able to escape infection and ran off somewhere to save himself. Marluxia has not been infected either, but it's only a matter of time before the parasite robs him of whatever little shriveled bits of... you know he has left."

"Well, enough of this nonsense, then," Xaldin huffed. "Since Superior and Xigbar are out of sorts, as Number Three, I am hereby taking over control of Organization XIII. And as my first order of business, we're going to put things back to normal and restore the Organization to its former glory," he pounded his fist in his other hand. "Is there a cure, Vexen?"

"I do not have one readily available, unfortunately, Xaldin. However, it is my guess that the... you know of our comrades have been taken into Fandom Hearts by the Gutless. If we make the journey there ourselves, hopefully we should be able to restore them back to normal and perhaps put an end to this nonsense once and for all," Vexen said confidently.

"Ah, the plot has finally arrived," Lexaeus nodded in approval. "There's no time to waste. Shall we be off?"

"One moment," Xaldin snapped his fingers to summon the captain of the Dragoon

Nobodies, who silently nodded to his commander. "You and the others, including the other types, are to stand guard here at the castle. Make sure no one comes in or out, and send several of your men to keep an eye on Superior and the others. Keep them from doing anything they'll regret later."

The Dragoon Captain eyed Xemnas and Xigbar on the floor behind it, and glanced back at Xaldin with something akin to alarm.

"Don't worry. They're harmless, spineless little wimps and shouldn't give you any trouble," Xaldin assured the creature before it nodded again and disappeared. He motioned for the other two to follow him to the door. "Now, let's—"

"Vexen...? VEXEN!"

Marluxia's voice erupted into a shrill scream as he entered the room, dropping to his knees and rolling around on the ground in terror. His three colleagues eyed him with wonderment as he covered his ears and began rocking back and forth. "PLEASE Vexen! I didn't mean it NO! DON'T... RAPE... MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

"What? I beg your pardon, why would I ever rape *you*; much less rape anyone at all?" Vexen looked quite insulted.

"LEXAEUS! XALDIN! You won't let him rape me, will you?" Marluxia sobbed, clutching at the bottoms of their robes and sniveling for all he was worth. "I'M TIRED OF BEING RAPED! PLEASE!"

"I'm fairly certain you've never been raped, Number Eleven," Lexaeus assured him.

"If I were even the type, Eleven, I would *die* before I'd rape you. Who knows where you've been?" Vexen snapped.

"I take it the parasite's gotten to him, too," Xaldin sighed, placing a weary hand on his forehead. "Never mind. Just leave him here. We've got things to be doing."

"NOT ME!" Marluxia whimpered, covering his face with his hood. "NOT ME!"

"That's right, not you," Vexen spoke condescendingly, as though he were a child. "Why don't you stay here and keep an eye on everyone? One and Two are in here, Six, Nine and Ten are in the Lounge and Seven is in his room. Let's make sure they all stay nice and unconscious."

"Why should I listen to you?" Marluxia said miserably. "I... *haaaate* you!"

"If you do it we'll buy you a nice sun bonnet while we're out," Xaldin suggested.

Lip quivering, Marluxia suddenly nodded, meeker than an anemic kitten. "'Kay."

"Come, gentlemen. We're off," Xaldin glanced triumphantly out the window at the Dark City before them.

It seems he'd finally found something interesting to do.

Smells Like Teenage Wasteland

Chapter Two: Smells Like Teenage Wasteland

"I hate to be the one raining on the parade, but how do we plan on getting to Fandom Hearts?" Lexaeus pitched a fair question as our three heroes made their way down to the docking bay in the basement of the Castle That Never Was. "We can use our teleportation powers to reach it, but that's a long way to travel, and through several world dimensions as well."

"Good point. By the time we even reach the other side of Fandom Hearts, we'll be exhausted," Xaldin frowned, placing an inquisitive hand on his chin. "I don't fancy our chances against hoards of Heartless and Gutless if we're already weak from travel."

Unfazed, Vexen shook his head. "Don't be so worried, gentlemen. We can utilize a Gelatinous Confectionary Transportation Vehicle."

There was a pause.

"You mean a gummi ship," Lexaeus nudged him in the elbow.

"No, I mean a Gelatinous Confectionary Transportation Vehicle," Vexen insisted. "I refuse to call it a gummi ship. There's something terribly unthreatening about that name. It makes me feel like less of a man."

"Well, don't," Xaldin sneered. "We must be confident in our manhood, no matter what we encounter in the worlds of Fandom Hearts—self-consciousness will only make us easier targets for the Gutless, and I have no desire to lose my... you know and end up laying on the floor whispering sweet nothings in somebody's ear."

"We really ought to have taken photographs of them while we were there," Vexen changed the subject. "That could have been lovely blackmail material for years."

"No," Lexaeus shook his head. "I wouldn't want to be the one to approach Superior about his special feelings for Xigbar."

"I wouldn't want to be there to see Saïx wake up with curlers in his hair," Xaldin added as the trio approached an impressive black and silver gummi ship—one of the

Defender types commonly seen out on patrol around The World That Never Was. This particular ship was called the G.S. Existentialist. Note the author's intelligent use of a philosophical term in the ship's name. Xaldin raised his hand and the gangway lowered for the three of them to head inside.

"This one will be perfect. We can fly this through the gateway of Fandom Hearts, then teleport to whatever worlds we can reach. We'll be sure to find our colleagues'... you knows somewhere in there, right Vexen?"

"Presumably," Vexen replied. "I'll see if I can't dig anything up with the on-board computer. It is still unknown how the... you know the Gutless steal are actually utilized."

"Perhaps it's similar to the Heartless... some kind of monster?" Lexaeus guessed.

There was another pause, presumably for the three of them to screech their trains of thought to a halt before they even got started.

"This is all remarkably Freudian," Xaldin shook his head in disgust.

The gate to Fandom Hearts was conspicuously placed in the center of a tremendous asteroid belt out in the middle of nowhere, just a few negative x quadrants from The Big Top, six light years from the Land of Llamas just until you pass Camelot, take a left at the intersection of Latin America and Sherwood Forest and second star to the right—not to the left, that's St. Canard. It resembled nothing so much as it resembled a great plane floating in space, a white plane with purple bars protecting it from invading ships and a tremendous Keyhole in the center of it, the sort that would have any Keybearer worth his stones peeing himself in anticipation of sealing it. Thank you very much, the narrator does not need you to write drabble about that particular image or any metaphorical interpretation thereof.

The G.S. Existentialist approached at a steady speed, and the onboard computers were finally able to pick up some more useful expository data regarding Fandom Hearts as a whole—and more importantly, performing a bunch of technological wizardry that the narrator is too lazy to talk about, Vexen was able to pick up a signal of a world beyond the gate.

"The computer is detecting the presence of Nobodies in a world just beyond the barrier of Fandom Hearts," Vexen said, sounding pleased.

"Nobody we know?" Lexaeus asked.

"Yes, Nobody we know," Vexen replied, before taking a minute to think that one out.

"Oh? Who is it?" Lexaeus urged him.

"What?"

"Nobody we know."

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"Wait, wait, wait, did you mean nobody we know, or *Nobody* we know?"

"*Nobody* we know."

"Oh—well then, no, I can't tell if it's any of ours."

"Ah, grammar jokes," Xaldin smiled and leaned back in his seat.

The ship continued its approach at a lazy speed, finally coming within a short distance of the huge keyhole separating the dimensions from one another. Lexaeus kept a close watch on his computer monitor. "That's an impressive Keyhole on the gate to Fandom Hearts," he commented. "Is it sealed?"

Vexen shook his head, "No, no. Anybody can get into Fandom Hearts. It's getting out with your brains and stomach contents intact that's difficult."

"What about this world on the other side?" Xaldin glanced into a computer monitor on his side, studying it for any clues. "What is it picking up so far?"

Vexen shook his head. "Not much. The presence of at least one Nobody and many other worldly beings. I haven't yet scanned for our comrades' te- um..."

"You almost said it, didn't you?" Xaldin grinned.

"I did not," Vexen snapped. "And in any case, it seems that the world I'm picking up is a fairly large one, right on the other side of the Keyhole. We'll be forced to land there before we can go anywhere else."

"No matter. We'll need to look around for our comrades'... you know anyway," Lexaeus said optimistically.

"We're close enough," Xaldin said finally, standing up and smirking triumphantly. "Leave the ship here, Vexen, we'll teleport down and get this over with."

"You want to just let the ship drift around in zero gravity? *Fantastic* idea," Vexen snapped. "I don't like the looks of these readouts. This is no ordinary world we're landing on... it's coming back with all sorts of hostile negative energy and a huge concentration of Gutless."

"What other choice to we have?" Xaldin retorted. "If you have to, invoke the DEM engines and let the ship drift wherever it likes. We're running on a time limit here."

"The DEM engines?" Vexen huffed. "I *hate* those! They're so..."

Lexaeus cleared his throat. "I am going down to the world for initial scouting now. If you two wouldn't mind, please resolve your issues and join me. That would be splendid."

"Oh, fine," Vexen smashed an important-looking red button labeled "DEM", and the lights within the ship began to blink on and off red and green.

"Prepare yourselves, gentlemen, for the most dangerous mission that we of Organization XIII have ever partaken in, especially for the sake of our brethren," Xaldin warned them, rolling up his sleeves. "For we are about to enter... FANDOM HEARTS."

"Yes, we know," Vexen and Lexaeus reminded him as the three of them vanished into dark portals.

"You two wouldn't know a dramatic transition if it bit you in the ass," Xaldin complained.

The DEM engine—short for "Deus Ex Machina" Engine— was developed several decades ago by the most brilliant of Nobody scientists in all of Dark City—that is, Vexen and Zexion after a night of heavy drinking. Ironically, the device itself was created as part of a Crappy Plot Device to skip over a bunch of tedious parts in the very story you are now reading. It was first intended it to be a weapon for use in battling their enemies, namely the hoards upon hoards of increasingly more vicious

Heartless that descended upon their city. It became apparent after a few uses, though, that the DEM engine made things almost a little bit too easy.

So, rather than be completely thrown out, the DEM engines were recalled and instead installed in several selected examples of the Nobody's gummi ships, including the G.S. Existentialist, perhaps in preparation for a situation just like this one.

Or maybe that was just another Deus Ex Machina.

Despite Vexen's complaints, once Xaldin finished his dramatic speech, the DEM engines kicked into high gear, creating a vortex at the back of the ship that opened up a long path from the G.S. Existentialist through time and space itself, through the great keyhole of Fandom Hearts and all the way down to a massive and ever growing planetoid within a few light years of the Keyhole itself.

By use of some more science terms and their teleportation, when we next saw our three protagonists, they had warped into existence... rather, they warped into non-existence... well, hmm. How do I phrase that?

They appeared in the middle of a lush green field of grass. There. Good enough.

Immediately after landing, it was very apparent that this wasn't the sort of world they were used to. There had been some changes to the wardrobes of all three of our heroes. Instead of black cloaks, they each wore somewhat more "earthly" garments that appropriately matched their personalities.

Xaldin had gained a small pair of sophisticated glasses and a fine twill suit, the sort often donned by librarians or burnt-out college professors with nothing left to cling to but their fancy suits and the fact that their students are throwing away good money and so MUST sit in front of them and just plain listen for a few hours a few times a week.

Vexen's hair had been pulled back in a ponytail, and he sighed at the stereotypical cliché of the scientist's garb he'd been forced to adopt—a white lab coat over a suit of his own.

Lexaeus thought he looked strange in a giant sweat suit or muscle shirt, and so was instead wearing the outfit of a biker gang leader—leather vest, ripped blue jeans, and a pair of aviator sunglasses.

"Nice disguises, gentlemen. God forbid any of the natives see us in our black

cloaks. We'll have six thousand wannabe Keybearers following us around in the hopes of being swept away on a magical adventure," Xaldin spoke the cynical speech of someone who's been there and done that, examining the world guide book that had appeared in his hands.

"What is this place called, Xaldin?" Lexaeus asked, craning his neck to have a look at the guidebook.

"According to the guidebook and that large, dramatic graphic there in the center of the screen, this world is called..."

DESTINY SANCTUARY PEAK HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMY GRAMMAR SCHOOL

"That must be the aforementioned school," Lexaeus motioned to a large building with impossibly fancy architecture a short distance away.

"You've got to be kidding me," Vexen sneered. "For one thing, aside from the ridiculously corny name, you cannot have a 'high school academy grammar school'. 'High school' and 'academy' are silly together as it is—but grammar school is the same as 'elementary school', which is for children ages 5 to 12, not teenagers. And second of all— *why* would anybody want to live in a world that was nothing but high school all over again? And why would anybody possibly want to invoke it in Fandom Hearts?"

"They say high school is the best four years of your life," Lexaeus shrugged.

"Who's 'they'?" Vexen sneered. "If those four years are to be the pinnacle of my life, I might as well go jump in front of a train."

"You didn't have a good time in high school, did you, Vexen?" queried Xaldin.

Never one to hold grudges, Vexen shook his head. "I never went to high school. *He* did. And *he* hated it. Lousy football players, sucking all the funding into their cesspool of aggressive adolescent sporting events for the weak of mind, stealing chemistry sets and copying tests off the smart kids, stupid teenage girls moaning and crying about all the drama in their lives... 'Even! Even! Oh my god, Even, you won't believe what Sasha said to me!' And the food... Let's not discuss the food."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear about your Other's traumatic educational past," Xaldin opened to the back page of the guidebook, which had conveniently transformed into a small operational scanning computer. "But let's focus on the task at hand. The

Nobody signal is getting stronger by the second."

"It must be one of ours—perhaps Numbers Eight, Twelve or Thirteen?" Lexaeus looked optimistic at this guess.

"Perhaps. The signal's coming from somewhere in the building. Also, we're picking up a second, weaker signal that the guidebook can't identify. It, too, is somewhere in the building," Xaldin closed the book and began on his way towards the impressive school.

"Brace yourselves, gentlemen," Lexaeus suggested, following close behind. "I have heard rumors about worlds like this. This could be a very difficult task indeed..."

"Oh hell," Lexaeus said disdainfully a few minutes later, standing in the foyer of the commons/cafeteria area. "It's even worse than I thought. It's a 7th-12th grade school."

"*Middle* schoolers," Vexen sneered with disgust. "They think they're so great because they're technically teenagers."

"Stay with me, gentlemen, the signal's getting even stronger," Xaldin told them, though even he was noticeably disturbed by the blithering, insipid cesspool of teenage angst and pointless spectacle. All around them, crowds of eerily familiar students were engaged in the daily grind of—surprisingly, not a lot of schoolwork. It was mostly internal dramatics, emo whining, fights, relationship troubles, ridiculously overcomplicated love triangles and polygons of all shapes and sizes, oblivious faculty, the unsettling religion of prom-worship, and who was sitting next to who at lunch when they said they'd sit next to some other person and how MEAN they are.

"HEY! What you punks doin' on our turf?"

A terribly stereotypical voice halted our three heroes from their mind-numbing reverie, and they turned around to see an 11th-grade boy who was either doing his best to look like his clothes didn't fit him, or like he was making some kind of fashion point. Seifer crossed his arms and furiously sized up the three adults, Fuu and Rai (Fuujiin and Raijin for the FF8 purists) close behind. In an attempt to dress like street punks, they all looked like they'd pulled their clothes out of a garbage bin, either that or gone dumpster diving behind the Goodwill and just put on whatever they happened to find, matching or no. There was a lot of camouflage... or spaghetti

stains. Hard to tell.

"What're a bunch of adults like you doin' around here? We ain't gonna stand for you trespassin' in our hallowed halls!" Seifer thumbed the side of his face.

"That's right, y'know!" Rai added mindlessly.

"Pedophiles," Fuu accused shortly. As always.

"Who are you to be strutting around like you own this place, boy?" Vexen sneered.

"What, you ain't heard of me? Name's Seifer—I'm head of the DSPHSAGS Disciplinary Committee, and we're the biggest bad asses on this campus!" Seifer struck a dramatic pose. "Ain't nobody messes with us! Not even a couplea tough-guy adults!"

"Who ain't supposed to be hangin' around the commons at lunch time, y'know!" Rai struck a fearsome pose behind Seifer.

"Against the rules," Fuu pointed out.

"Yeah, we've kicked more asses and skipped more classes than any other chump around here! We ain't been to class in like, two months, ain't that right, guys?" Seifer boasted.

"Yeah, ditchin' every period y'know!"

"Imperfect attendance."

"Question," Vexen lifted a finger.

"What, punk?" Seifer turned on him furiously.

"If you haven't been to class in months, why in the hell are you still here?" Vexen pointed out in a quiet, contemplative tone. "You realize that most high schools have attendance policies regarding such things? They don't have to put up with you for so long if you are dead set on failing all your classes and simply roaming the hallways like a gang of hooligans."

"What I want to know," Xaldin added, "Is why you come here to hang out and then fail to actually attend your classes. You make the effort of waking up, brushing your hair, bathing, and apparently, pulling clothes out of the rag pile and coming here..."

and then you fail to attend your classes. Your utter failure as productive human beings astounds me."

Lexaeus was quick to agree with his comrades. "And even better, you come to school and appear to work as a sort of rule enforcement squad. Your logic is incomprehensibly stupid. Isn't there somewhere else you could go to waste your pathetic lives? A shopping mall? An amusement park? Anywhere even more remotely interesting than a *high school*?"

There was a long moment of silence as Seifer, Fuu and Rai took some time to really question why it was they were in this situation.

Finally, the silence ended as Seifer burst out with, "Aw, SCREW you! You guys better come up with a real good reason why you're here, or I'm callin' the principal on your ass right now!"

"Yeah, what, you here to pick up your kids, y'know?" Rai asked.

"Career Day," Fuu said shortly.

It took only a short glance at one another to solidify this story. "Career Day," Xaldin replied seamlessly. "We're here to give special presentations for Career Day."

"Oh yeah! Ms. Larxene didn't say nuthin' about Career Day!" Seifer threatened.

"Ms. *Larxene*?" Lexaeus's eyes widened. "Who would give that woman a teacher's licensure?"

"We think the same thing, y'know," Rai shrugged.

"Anger management," Fuu nodded.

"Stop getting off topic!" Seifer smacked his toady in the back of the head. "Well, Career Day or not, you adults better watch your asses! And I better see you in class or else I'll know you was lyin' and I'll kick your ass!"

"You don't go to class," Vexen pointed out.

This time, an outwitted and disillusioned Seifer, realizing the idiocy of his own plot conventions within the very fabric of this world, was off in a corner sobbing about his wasted youth as Fuu and Rai tried awkwardly to comfort him.

"I just love crushing the spirits of uppity little bastards," Vexen looked quite a bit more comfortable with the surroundings now, cracking his knuckles and smiling pleasantly.

"Yes, well," Lexaeus was back on the ball, having opened the world guidebook and glanced at the computer monitor on the back cover. "That may have been a more useful conversation than we thought. Larxene is in this world. We should locate her and assess her condition."

"Now, not necessarily. It could just be this world's invocation of Larxene," Xaldin reminded him. "The signal we're getting won't belong to Larxene if she's not the real one."

"Yes, but in either case, we ought to find out where this Nobody signal is coming from," Lexaeus repeated. "Let's get to searching. The sooner we get out of here, the better. There could be Gutless gathering here at any time."

In their intrepid search for the source of the signal, Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus could not possibly have been privy to the plethora of exciting plotlines going on around the commons at that very moment. The narrator is sure they would have been *heartbroken* to know this. Or rather, not heartbroken... oh screw it.

At the table nearest to the wall sat young Kairi Tsukihimemiyakage, a tenth grader who had good grades, excelled in the art program, and believed in herself and her own opinions and didn't particularly like falling into trends. This, of course, made her the biggest, ugliest loser in the entire school in the eyes of her peers. Young Kairi didn't mind, though—she spent her lonely lunchtimes at the end of the "dork table", working on her sketchbook and listening to books on tape.

Kairi's two best friends were named Hayner Kugiyama and Pence Teriyaki-Smith. Hayner was an eccentric nerd who wasn't a bad sketch artist in his own right. His hobbies included dancing and eating tater tots. This particular day, Hayner had borrowed a piece of paper from Kairi and was drawing pictures of ligers. Pence was a foreign exchange student, slightly short-spoken with an adorably hilarious lack of knowledge about the customs of whatever country Destiny Sanctuary Peak High School Academy Grammar School was located in. He was studying a Japanese dictionary for some reason.

"Boy, I hope I do well on the literature exam later today," Kairi said, rubbing her eyes behind her thick glasses and taking a break to sip her chocolate milk.

"Gosh, Kairi. You're so good at literature. You'll do fine, okay?" Hayner wheezed in an oddly familiar nasally tone.

"Hai Kairi-chan, you studied domo domo domo much!" Pence assured her.

Also seated at the "dork" table was an awkward eighth grader named Vivi Kokoyimajima. He was never to be seen without his hat, even though it was against school dress code to wear a hat. He was an on and off acquaintance of Kairi's gang, but spent most of his time of late (between making up moves for the mail-reply chess game he was playing with somebody in the state penitentiary across town) staring forlornly at the next table over.

"Hey Pence, you fat lard! Do you want some tots?" Hayner wheezed, holding out a bucket of tater tots.

"Hai, Hayner-sempai! Watashi wa wanta tots domo muchos, minna-san!" Pence raised his hand at the offer. "Oy Vivi-chan, you wanna tasty tots kawaii dono!"

"Ah! Uh, no thanks, Pence," Vivi sighed longingly and continued to gaze at her.

"Her" was Naminé Yukimoratachi, the most popular girl in school, captain of the cheerleader squad, and permanent resident of the "popular" table, conveniently located a few yards away from the "dork" table. Currently text messaging someone on her cell phone, she was an oblivious little thing with a shock of blonde hair and that stereotypical giggly cheerleader attitude. She did not notice Vivi staring at her, nor did she notice a lot of things: her current principal quest in life was to find the perfect dress for the formal tonight. And she needed it to look PERFECT with her boyfriend and his absolutely spectacular hair color!

Naminé's somewhat unlikely boyfriend was Riku Ginpachikun, who up until he started going out with Naminé had been quite famous as the school's standard issue rebellious goth kid. He still dressed in all black and wore black eyeliner at the edges of his turquoise eyes—old habits are hard to break, after all. Riku serves as further proof of Naminé's utter obliviousness, as he, his parents, his friends, and all of their respective grandmothers knew that he was a flaming closet case, merely holding up a sham of a relationship with Naminé to save himself a little respect among the student body.

He was spending his lunchtime staring at the asses of every young man who passed him by.

Currently in scope was the muscular ass of Riku's unlikely best friend, the captain

of the Destiny Sanctuary Peak High School Academy Grammar School Flying Wuggles football team, a handsome young man named Sora Wanahakaruugi. It shouldn't have taken you too terribly long to figure out that Sora was the captain of many other sports teams as well, and possessed the nicest hair and the pearliest white set of teeth in the school. It should also be mentioned that Sora was as dumb as a rock, failed all his classes, and despite his rumored sexual virility, was actually the world's most innocent, naïve, twitterpated little virgin. Twenty points for the Disney movie reference.

Tossing a football up and down above him, Sora approached his friends and smiled like an idiot. "Dude you guys should've totally seen the sweet touchdown I made at the game last night! Coach said it saved the entire game for us—we were totally tied with two minutes left in the fourth period..."

"Quarter," Riku took some time out of his ogling to correct him, in the most seductive voice possible.

"Huh?"

"Fourth quarter."

"Dude, I'm totally the captain of the football team," Sora snapped. "Don't be all up in my grill."

"Whatever," Riku replied broodily at having been shut down. "It's time for class anyway."

As he rose from his stool and stomped off to Ms. Larxene's fifth period language arts class, he spotted senate president national honor society baccalaureate scholarship recipient Olette Yuuuki stapling up colorful posters for that night's advertised Spring Fling Prom Hop Formal. His eye twitched and he abruptly ripped it down, wadding it up into tiny pieces which he proceeded to sprinkle them heartlessly in Olette's hair.

"HEY!" Olette screeched as he continued on his way. "Riku, you jerk! Yeah, like nobody's gonna recognize that move from that one teen movie! How CLEVER you are!"

Ms. Larxene had thick dark rings under her blue eyes, a frazzled mop of blonde hair on her head, tortoiseshell-framed cat's eye glasses and a voice that sounded like

she gargled with cigarette butts and vodka every morning. She was an extremely apathetic woman—for god's sake, she graduated college with a doctorate in *philosophy*. She was supposed to have gone places with that degree! But no, it's only after you're out in the real world that you learn that nobody knows who John Stuart Mill and Aristotle are, and nobody particularly cares, and you're going to be forced into a meager-paying job in education no matter what you'd previously expected.

And by GOD did she hate children.

As the students from her fifth-period language arts class slowly filed in, she was seated on her desk in a far-too-short plaid skirt, a white blouse with the buttons popping out around her cleavage, and a fairly visible black lace bra. She appeared to be flirting shamelessly with somebody's father and overheard conversational snatches included, "... off to the broom closet, nobody'll be lookin' in there" and "... come on baby, you can light mama's fire next passing period..."

Meanwhile, as per the plan, Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus were sitting in tiny, uncomfortable plastic chairs along the wall of Ms. Larxene's room when Riku and the other students arrived for class. Xaldin and Vexen tried to glance over Lexaeus' shoulder as he sat analyzing the signals picked up by the guidebook.

"Anything?" Vexen whispered impatiently.

"No," Lexaeus shook his head and pointed at one of the readouts on the screen. "The Nobody signal we caught isn't coming from Larxene."

"She's certainly sending out *some* kind of signals, in any case," Xaldin commented as Ms. Larxene sat down on some poor father's lap and started caressing his hair whispering something about bad, bad boys. Across the room, some unfortunate student sank deep into his chair and thought of chocolate rabbits and happy things.

"But not the one we're looking for. That must be this world's invocation of her, and the real one is still out there somewhere," Lexaeus reasoned.

"Then sitting in here giving Career Day presentations is a waste of time!" Vexen hissed under his breath. "We should be tracking that signal to its source!"

"Patience, Vexen," Xaldin warned him. "The obnoxious little twit in the beanie may have been onto something—we will look suspicious wandering the hallways of this place alone, and the last thing we want is to cause uproar."

Across the room, Kairi was innocently preparing her spiral notebook to write

down every word anybody said, while Sora and Riku were whispering something back and forth to one another.

"I bet you can't make Kairi into the most popular girl in school," Riku challenged.

"What? Of course I can, dorkface," Sora replied haughtily. "What's the time limit?"

"By the time the formal starts tonight," Riku smirked.

"Right—and what are we betting?"

"A kiss."

"What?"

"I mean... a kick. In the ass. I'll kick your ass if you don't," Riku recovered smoothly. "Because I'm not gay or anything."

Sora raised an eyebrow. "Who said you were?"

"Nobody. Because I'm not. Yeah. Totally straight. I love chicks. Yay boobs."

"Okay, okay, everybody pipe down or I'll reinstate corporal punishment—and I do love spanking," Ms. Larxene snapped, turning her attention away from the unfortunate father and back to the class. "Let's get this thing over with, I'm cravin' a smoke. Welcome to Career Day. Today's the day we bring in all your lowlife parents so they can lie about their stupid jobs and build up your hopes and dreams of escaping your humdrum, pathetic, demeaning middle class existences until you shell out 100,000 munny for college and find out your worthless degree qualifies you to be *senior* burger flipper down at the Grease N' Go, and not much else. Those of you who don't drop out and end up crack-addicted burnouts under a bridge downtown can maybe bother some of these jerks at work to set up internships as indentured slaves and glorified coffee-fetchers all summer with absolutely no reimbursement."

The students met her introduction with blank faces. One girl in the back row suffered an existential crisis.

"Okay, folks, who wants to go first?" Ms. Larxene sat on her desk again and crossed her arms impatiently.

But before anybody could volunteer to lie about their stupid jobs, there came a knock on the door.

"Dammit! I'm trying to EDUCATE here!" Ms. Larxene snarled, snapping her fingers. "Vivi! Get the damn door!"

The hapless boy was snapped out of his daydream about asking Naminé to the formal that night to turn the doorknob and introduce a tall, dark, mysterious and handsome stranger. Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus recognized him immediately.

He was a handsome man with the tan and physique of a California surfer god, yellow eyes the color of gold, long, luxurious black and silver hair pulled back in a ponytail over his shoulder, and a delicate scar lining his left cheek. A slim, sophisticated eye patch covered his right eye. He wore a stylish Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirt and jeans beneath his black janitor's apron and the apron, too, was designer and more expensive than it ought to have been. His features were soft and dreamy, and he was most certainly the loveliest and most effeminate depiction of Xigbar they had ever seen. So of course, something was terribly wrong.

As all the female students in the room (and Riku) paused to stare dreamily at Xigbar, the prettiest janitor in the Destiny Islands School District, the little computer monitor in the back of the world guidebook began beeping incessantly.

"Like totally begging your like total pardon, babe," the author got a little carried away with Xigbar's accent, "I come knockin' round these parts to pick up your like... trash can, babealooie."

"You can pick up more than that if you want, big boy," Ms. Larxene fanned her face and unsubtly uncrossed her legs, gesturing to the trash can next to her desk, filled to the brim with nameless papers and empty bottles of hooch.

Brushing strands of beautiful Pantene Pro-V-shampooed hair out of his eyes, Xigbar strode across the room and as he passed our three heroes in their chairs along the wall, he glanced at them and gave an unmistakably evil smirk.

He left a moment later and the hormones in the room began to die back down to normal levels. Ms. Larxene fanned her face and cleared her throat. "Ho ho ho... Now then! Sexy distractions aside, we're gonna go around and see what everybody does to pay for their booze and hookers. Starting with you there, on the end."

"I'm the president of a banking firm," the mother Larxene indicated spoke up, "And I find your comments on booze and hookers very offensive."

"I find your haircut very offensive," Ms. Larxene waved it off. "Move it on down the line."

"I collect garbage for a living."

"I'm the lifeguard trainer at the rec center downtown."

"I scalp tickets."

"I work a busy desk job that leaves me too tired to do anything when I get home but watch reality TV and eat pork rinds."

"I'm a sex therapist."

"And then there were three," Ms. Larxene smiled at our heroes. "What do you do for a living?"

"We follow janitors," Xaldin announced, as the three of them stood up and bolted after Xigbar.

The door slammed closed behind them and after the awkward silence, Riku raised his hand. "Ms. Larxene, can I get an internship with *them*?"

"This is fascinating information, really," Vexen said mostly to himself as the trio hurried through the school hallways in search of the creepy Xigbar. "I can't believe I didn't think of it earlier! Now I know precisely what happens when a Gutless takes a... you know."

"Then get explaining," Xaldin urged him. "What in the worlds could have happened to make Xigbar so... so..."

"Pretty," Lexaeus offered.

"Yes. *Ugh*."

"Ah, but that wasn't Xigbar," Vexen smirked. "Remember the unusual signal we were getting? It was coming from him. That was his... you know."

Lexaeus and Xaldin paused, then glanced at Vexen with immense concern evident on their faces. "His what?" Lexaeus gaped.

"When a Heartless consumes somebody's heart, they transforms into a Heartless, while at the same time a Nobody is created, right? Well, when a Gutless steals

somebody's... you know, they turn into a being I like to call the Uke. Their... you know is transferred to Fandom Hearts, where it becomes an entirely separate being. I'll call it a Seme," Vexen explained. "The janitor we saw is Xigbar's Seme. Unlike the Uke, who are harmless, weak, sobby, effeminate and pathetic, the Seme are exceptionally attractive, sexually charged, dominating and in most cases, very unlikable."

"If we defeat the Seme, will Number Two turn back to normal?" Lexaeus looked at Vexen hopefully.

"I'm not sure. But whatever the case, we should follow him," Vexen pounded his fist in his other hand. "Just as we are the top-ranking agents of the Nobodies, the Semes will be the top-ranking agents of the Gutless. Destroying them one way or another will be instrumental to our mission."

"Something's off," Xaldin interrupted Vexen's slew of exposition and pointed to the signal tracer. "The Nobody signal is back, and it looks like Xigbar's Seme is heading towards it."

"Really? Where is it?" Lexaeus asked hurriedly.

"It looks like the Seme's leaving the building," Xaldin pointed to the signal. "He's headed into an apartment building across the street from the school."

"Then let's not waste any time. We'll corner him there!" Lexaeus glanced around to check and see if anybody was watching, then opened up a portal of darkness and the three of them stepped inside.

The apartment was dark, desolate and utterly trashed—crumpled newspapers, used-up boxes of snack food, countless empty pints of Ben and Jerry's sea salt ice cream and cigarette cartons were strewn across the room in a huge stack. The furniture was grimy, torn and worn-out, and the only light was to have come from a broken light bulb swinging eerily back and forth from the ceiling fixture. The TV played a fuzzy combination of several channels, casting blue shadows on the wall.

The front door opened and Xigbar's Seme pushed his way in, carrying a large black garbage bag full of papers (and the empty hooch bottles from Ms. Larxene's room). He smiled snidely at the prone figure on the couch, and dumped the garbage out to add to the pile, digging through until he found what he was looking for—a single paperclip.

He smiled again as he walked over to the TV to a complicated-looking antennae device—and the narrator implies even more complicated than the standard antennae devices, with all sorts of plugs and wires and doohickeys to screw in. The Seme unfolded the paperclip and delicately placed it between two of the wires, and the TV screen suddenly flickered to life with some kind of strange alien reading.

After a moment, a shadowy figure appeared through the symbols and spoke.

"XIGGY-KUN. HOW PROGRESSES YOUR MISSION?"

"It's totally going sweet, dude," Xiggy-kun kneeled before the screen (tripping on bits of garbage as he did) and nodded respectfully. "I got myself a totally sweet set up down at the school and like, nobody knows what's goin' on, *seriously*, dude."

"IS THE SUBJECT RESPONDING TO OUR EXPERIMENTS?"

"Yeah, dude, so far so good, y'know?" Xiggy-kun glanced over his shoulder at the helpless figure on the couch, throwing him a faint grin. "He tried to get away when we let our underlings go all psycho on the castle but they totally snagged 'im on 'is way out..."

"AND THERE HAVE BEEN NO SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITIES? NO SIGN OF ANY ATTEMPTS TO STOP OUR PLAN?"

"Nope, not that I saw, dude," Xiggy-kun snickered. "I got a little worried there t'day when I saw Three, Four n' Five hangin' out down at the school, but I figured ya maybe had to invoke 'em in this world, even stuff out a bit, y'know?"

There was a long moment of silence.

"THREE, FOUR, AND FIVE?"

"Um, yeah, dude," Xiggy-kun scratched his beautiful face. "Didn't you like... send 'em on down here?"

"AS IF!" a tremendous, sinister voice boomed from the other end of the broadcast, making Xiggy-kun twitch slightly. **"XALDIN IS A HAIRY, UGLY GORILLA, VEXEN'S AN OLD GEEZER AND LEXAEUS IS A BIG STUPID MUSCLEBRAIN! DO YOU THINK I WOULD *EVER* SULLY MY BEAUTIFUL FANDOM HEARTS WITH SUCH FILTH?"**

"Er, uh... guess not," Xiggy-kun shrugged sheepishly. "So's'at mean... they ain't

from around here?"

"IT MEANS THAT THEY ESCAPED FROM THE CASTLE! AND IT MEANS THAT THERE ARE NOW THOSE WHO WOULD STAND AGAINST MY BEAUTIFUL PLAN FOR COMPLETE DOMINATION OF THE UNIVERSE AS WE KNOW IT!"

"Dude, take a chill pill," Xiggy-kun waved his hands. "Ain't no need to freak out, man! I'll deal with 'em myself!"

"HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE WORKING ON THE EXPERIMENT? WE CAN'T ALLOW HIM TO FALL BACK INTO THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY! HE IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR BEINGS IN FANDOM HEARTS—AND IF WE FAIL TO CONVERT HIM TO OUR SIDE, THERE WILL BE BACKLASH SO TERRIBLE IT COULD DESTROY OUR ENTIRE PLAN!"

"Don't worry, dude, he's almost done," Xiggy-kun assured the stressed-out voice. "He'll be done in a couple hours, and that's ALL. While he's hangin', I'll just head on down to the school and lay the total smackdown on the Nobodies. That cool, dude?"

After a long moment of fuming silence, the voice spoke. *"FINE. BUT DON'T FAIL ME, XIGGY-KUN! I WASTED MY TIME AND ENERGY MAKING YOU A BEAUTIFUL BISHOUNEN RATHER THAN WIPING YOU OUT OF EXISTENCE ENTIRELY, SO YOU BETTER NOT FAIL ME."*

"You got nothin' to worry about, Grand Master Fangirl," Xiggy-kun grinned at the screen and seconds later, the signal went dead.

He stood up, stretched his arms behind him and turned back to the figure on the couch—a depressing, filthy, pale, scrawny and bony creature in worn street clothes, dazedly stuffing his face with more ice cream. His elbows were pin-pricked, his nose had remnants of cocaine dust on it, and he looked to be in the later stages of a severe drug addiction—apparently this is sexy to some deluded people in Fandom Hearts. He was a pathetic shell of a man, reeking of smoke, Tag body spray and complete and utter misery.

"Well, y'hear that, dude? The Grand Master Fangirl wants me t' have you ready to go by tonight! An' you know what that means?"

The figure lifted his head pathetically, showing off his weary, bloodshot eyes and the tearstains on his cheeks. "You'll finally rid me of this terrible, miserable nonexistence?"

"Nope," Xiggy-kun grinned. "We're uppin' your angst levels, Aku-chan."

Axel gave Xiggy-kun a noncommittal look and let his head sink back down into the cushions of the couch. "Effing yay."

IN THE NEXT CHAPTER:

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus will battle Xiggy-kun to save their... wow, is Axel in some sorry shape. Is it even worth it anymore?

And WHO is the Grand Master Fangirl! WHAT is her plan? AM I going to tell you right now? NO! SO STOP ASKING!

APOLOGIES AND MISCELLANY:

English, Japanese and Spanish languages, I'm sorry.

I have never seen Napoleon Dynamite. I have a funny story about those damn talking keychains though. Ask me sometime and I'll tell you why I REFUSE TO WATCH THE MOVIE.

Since You've Been Gone I'm Not Okay

Chapter Three: Since You've Been Gone, I'm Not Okay

It was going to be easy, or so it seemed to our three heroes as they bolted out the back door of Destiny Sanctuary Peak High School Academy Grammar School and back across the football field towards a small block of apartment buildings and restaurants. Of course, they had not yet come into contact with any Gutless and as narrative coincidence would have it, that's exactly what they ran into on about the fiftieth yard line of the football field.

At first, the hoard of vaguely humanoid creatures before them appeared to be nothing more than your usual preppy high school students with bleach blond hair, pasty complexions, acne problems, designer brand T-shirts and iPods blasting Kelly Clarkson music. There was no mistaking, however, the rather inappropriate-looking symbol on their abdominal regions, the pointy teeth and their obvious lust for... you know.

"Ah, we've been discovered," Xaldin remarked as the hoards of Preppy Gutless surrounded them, drooling, twitching, and mumbling frightening things like "*Laguna Beach last night was so intense*" and "*Ohmigod I can't operate in the morning without Starbucks!*"

"They'll have to be dispatched, then," Lexaeus held out his hand and the ground beneath him folded, giving rise to a pillar of stone and his trusty rusty tomahawk.

"We haven't got time for this!" Vexen grumbled but was quick to summon his ice shield out of thin air. "We're immune to their parasite, but I don't fancy finding out what happens if we get bitten or nicked in the leg."

"We'll just have to make it quick," Xaldin's six lances whirled into existence around him and the three of them struck suitably intimidating poses, as the Gutless graciously allowed them enough time to gather their weapons before attacking.

The ensuing bloodbath is far too dramatic and exciting for the author to properly convey here, but there were numerous highlights; Xaldin impaling five Preppy Gutless at once with his lances, Vexen freezing and shattering a number of them, and Lexaeus squashing many completely flat with his mighty hawk. It would make a mighty impressive FMV sequence. In no time at all the battle was over and the

Gutless lay in a bloody pile on the football field.

"Saïx had trouble with *those*?" Vexen couldn't help but laugh to himself as they casually walked away from the massacre. "Honestly. We could have gently tapped them in the shoulder and they'd have keeled over."

"This is only one type. I'm sure they get much more formidable down the road," Lexaeus pointed out.

"Vexen, we need to have a little talk about your battle laugh," Xaldin said out of nowhere a moment later.

"What?" Vexen turned to his colleague with a dangerous glare. "What do you mean?"

"Listen to you over there. HAH! HOO HOO HOO. Your laugh is... in a very, very sugarcoated word..." Xaldin searched for an appropriate term. "Effeminate."

"It most certainly is *not*!" Vexen snapped furiously.

"Squeaky, then."

"Shut up!" he roared, "I'd rather have a high-pitched laugh than a faux British accent like you!"

"Excuse me? *Faux*?" Xaldin looked very insulted. "How long have you known me, Vexen—*two* lives? And I've always spoken this way."

"You're from Radiant Garden like the rest of us, you pretentious Anglophile—"

"*Gentlemen*," Lexaeus cleared his throat. "Kindly stop your bickering so we can reach the source of this signal? It's growing weaker by the second and the longer we delay, the less likely we are to rescue our colleague, whoever it may be."

Xaldin and Vexen begrudgingly relented as Lexaeus motioned for them to follow him across the street.

"And anyway. Arguing about voice actors is stupid," he added.

Meanwhile, in room 302 of the South Ashfield Heights apartment building across

the street, Henry Townshend had been trapped for a little over five days. The inside of the door had been chained shut by a dead hippie in a flasher coat, the windows were locked, nobody could hear when he banged on the door and cried for help, and cryptic messages from a dead guy in the ceiling were littered around the floor.

But that's another story.

Next door, in room 304, Xiggy-kun was in the middle of preparing to deal with Axel once and for all. He'd unfolded the sofa, a Jennifer model that conveniently held a Hide-A-Torture-Slab, and strapped the weak, deflated Axel down to it in the most non-leading-to-a-yaoi-scene method possible. He was currently in the middle of setting up a large stereo system and had taken out a nasty-looking injection machine filled with some dark, glowing liquid.

"Look on the bright side, dude, you totally don't gotta suffer like this no more after we get all this into ya," Xiggy-kun smiled and patted the tank of liquid, labeled "EVANGELION™ BRAND 100% PURE ANGST. NO ARTIFICIAL COLORS."

"Uh... huh..." Axel mumbled, halfway into a coma. He didn't struggle as Xigbar's Seme hooked him up to the machine, filling his veins with Grade A Organic Moping and Misery.

"Aw, dude, don't look so down!" Xiggy-kun patted his victim on the arm and reached over to the stereo, flipping a switch and blasting some mood music at top volume. "Here dude, some MyChem oughta get you in the mood—always works for me, dude!"

"BURNIN' UP! JUST LIKE A MATCH YOU SLIDE TO INCINERAAAAATE—"

Axel's eyes glazed over. His pupils got very small. His lips opened as though to scream in torture, but no sound could come out. He could only writhe in agony on the table as he could feel his non-existent pulse quickening, his palms sweating and his... you know starting to shut down.

Unfazed, Xiggy-kun pulled out a DS to play with his Nintendog, Shnooky.

Speeding up the corridors of the apartment building, our three heroes could only barely hear the roaring chords of pure straight emo blasting from the third floor, followed shortly by a horrified shriek that could only belong to one member of Organization XIII.

"That'll be Number Eight," Lexaeus nodded decisively, as the computer finally pinned precise identity on the signal. "But not a Seme or an Uke—a genuine signal."

"Which means he's still unharmed!" Xaldin pounding a fist into his palm. "But probably not for long, with that freakish Xigbar Seme tending to him."

The music got clearer as they got closer and closer to the apartment. "MCR? That *sick son of a bitch!*" Vexen snarled furiously.

They arrived in the third floor hallway and the music and the screaming intensified from room 304. Xaldin tested the doorknob but found it securely locked and dead bolted.

"Allow me, gentlemen," Lexaeus summoned up his tomahawk again and prepared to beat down the door, until he was interrupted by a small voice near the floor.

"Excuse me sirs! I need to get into that apartment to see my mother!" a frightening, chubby little boy in a striped T-shirt lisped and tugged on Lexaeus' jacket, pointing to room 302. He was the sort of creepy child that you feel bad being afraid of, but who you just know is going to grow up into a heart-stabbing psychopathic serial killer with aspirations of unleashing Silent Hill to awaken an apartment building and change the world as we...

Well, but that's another story.

"Okay," Lexaeus shrugged and simply widened the arc of his swing, quite effortlessly taking out the entire wall, doors and all.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus headed into the trashed apartment before them, and the creepy little boy squealed in horror at the damage, rushing past a very surprised and weary-looking Henry Townshend next door.

"Dudes, who invited you in?" Xiggy-kun was understandably not pleased to see them as our heroes kicked down the door to the back room, horrified at the sight before them.

"The man you are torturing is a member in good standing of Organization XIII," Xaldin said sternly, pulling his lances out of the air again. "And you are a being made of the... you know of another member of Organization XIII. We are thereby obligated to destroy you and stop whatever the hell it is you're doing."

"Haha, yeah, totally, dudes, we heard all about you," Xiggy-kun snickered and

crossed his arms, having a seat on the Torture Slab where Axel lay motionless. "Couplea freaks too ugly and unpopular to fall into our beautiful little society we got goin' on... too bad, too bad. And so you come around tryin' to mess up what the rest of us can have an' you can't? Totally uncool, dudes."

"You and your kind were never supposed to exist!" Vexen snarled, shield in hand. "You're the run-off dredges of a Nobody, who isn't supposed to exist in the first place—there is NO part for you to play in this world, you wretched monster!"

"Aww, dude, you're just jealous—an' that ain't nice, is it, Axel?" Xiggy-kun leaned down and tapped Axel on the shoulder as the redhead began to stir.

"Mmph... I want you to pwess your body into mine and tell me evewyting's gonna be all wight..." Axel mumbled in a quiet, giggling sort of voice.

They were too late. Axel had become an Uke.

"You bastard!" Lexaeus growled, lifting his tomahawk over his shoulder. "How dare you try to destroy our organization like this? You will pay for your crimes!"

"Now, now... threatening assault is a felony assault in these parts, friends!" a new but somewhat familiar voice said from the doorway of the closet, as Axel's Seme stepped onto the scene. He looked eerily similar to the Axel we all know and love, if that Axel had been eaten by a Hot Topic outlet store and spit out into a weight loss clinic. He sneered evilly at his would-be rescuers, a cigarette pressed cleanly between his lips and his arms crossed. "Felony assault! Got it memorized?"

"Looks t' me like you dudes are surrounded," Xiggy-kun smirked, "Meet my new buddy, Aku-chan."

"A-K-U-C-H-A-N. Got it memorized? 'Sup?" Aku-chan grinned and flashed them the international playboy sign (the wink, the click, the point). "Any you boys wanna take a ride on my pony?"

There was a long pause.

"Your *what*?" Vexen muttered incredulously.

"You're horny. Let's do it. Ride it. My pony. Got it memorized?" Aku-chan grinned. "Leave that little wuss on the table and let's go get it on, hot stuff."

"Oh for the love of nothing," Xaldin slapped his forehead in disgust. "Okay, we *get*

it. Axel has a catchphrase he likes to say, and Xigbar has a California surfer-style accent. Is it *really* necessary for them to use it in every single line of dialogue, even when it doesn't make sense?"

"Dudes, it's called 'characterization'? Like duh," Xiggy-kun rolled his eyes.

"Ah, *no*. Rather, it's called 'I'm a moron and I can't write believable dialogue!'" Vexen snapped.

"You guys are *mean*," Aku-chan hissed, drawing out two chakrams that more than a little bit resembled his Uke counterpart's. "Stomping around here and criticizin' our work like you own the place and like you're some kinda almighty Grammar Gods—total snobs, got it memorized? You know what you three are?"

"Humor us. What are we?" Xaldin challenged.

"You three dudes are *homophobes*," Xiggy-kun pronounced slowly and very deliberately.

"H-O-M-O-P-H-O-B-E-S. Got it memorized?" Aku-chan grinned.

"I would hardly consider opposing the defamation of our characters to be an act of homophobia, sirs," Lexaeus pointed out.

"There's no use arguing with them, Lexaeus. They're Semes. They have no brains," Vexen sneered. "They're nothing but brainless, beautiful empty shells that exist only to have badly-written sex with one another at the slightest drop of a hat, no matter how unlikely or illogical the time, the place or the motives. You will never be able to reason with them."

"We exist for one purpose and one purpose only," Aku-chan cackled maniacally, drawing closer to our heroes as though to attack. "When our kind takes over the universe on the other side of Fandom Hearts, we will spread... and soon, not only all of Fandom Hearts, but all of the Canon Universe will be ours to command! Got it memorized?"

"But in order for that to happen, dudes," Xiggy-kun joined Aku-chan in a round of his own evil laughter. "We gotta snag your... you know."

"And once we do, you'll be simpering Uke wusses on the ground, and we'll take your Semes and do with them whateeeever we want," Aku-chan snickered.

"Speaking of whatever we want, dude," Xiggy-kun interrupted, scratching his cheek. "I totally wanna do you right here, dude."

"Only if I get to be on top—"

"That's it!" Xaldin roared, "This conversation is OVER!"

And as he spoke, six lances went flying through the room in a tremendous whirlwind, accomplishing a number of extremely important tasks all at once.

Lances numbered one and two made a direct beeline for the two Semes on either side of the trio, number one imbedding itself rather deeply into Xiggy-kun's hollow body and number two just barely missing Aku-chan. Lance number three impaled the main core of the Angst Injector, sending a shower of sparks across the apartment and igniting several piles of garbage into flames. Lance number four circled around its master in the air as Vexen and Lexaeus ducked under it, and returned to Xaldin's hand in time to halt Aku-chan's lunging attack before it even started. Lance number five followed through on Xiggy-kun, throwing the Seme back ten yards and into the wall. Lance number six hung around for a minute before mercifully destroying the blasting stereo system before Gerard Way could burst into another soulful ballad about suicide pacts and cutting your wrists and all those kind of cheerful things.

Four of six returned to Xaldin's side and he sneered triumphantly at the destruction they'd wrought.

Vexen leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Show-off."

"Very impressive, Xaldin," Lexaeus nodded astutely, "But Number Eight's Seme seems to have escaped."

"We'll follow him later. Right now we're going to be busy dealing with this trash," Xaldin turned back to Xiggy-kun, who was quite uncomfortably pinned to the back wall of the apartment and looked like he was in a lot of pain.

"DUDES! That was so totally UNCOOL!" Xiggy-kun moaned, reaching up and pulling up the edge of his eye patch, inside of which was set a small mirror. "How's my hair? Is my hair okay, dudes?"

"I don't believe it—he's not even missing an eye!" Vexen groaned, rolling his eyes. "I guess he's just *too* ugly if he's disfigured, hmm?"

"Your hair is as unnaturally lovely as usual, Seme," Lexaeus approached Xiggy-kun, cracking his knuckles. "You seem to be trapped there. I don't imagine you'll be going after your friend."

"I got two lances pinnin' me to the wall, big dude, you think I'munna go surfin'?" Xiggy-kun spat. "As if, ya big dolt."

"Honestly, why is there such a stereotype that because I am a larger man, I'm an idiot?" Lexaeus glanced over his shoulder at his comrades, who could only shake their heads and shrug. "If I had a dime for every time somebody wrote me incapable of speaking in the first person..."

Vexen pulled out the computer and did a quick calculation. "The number of Fandom Hearts invocations of you, times ten, adjusted to the appropriate dollar amount. Two percent margin of error."

Lexaeus frowned. "I wonder where they *get* that idea."

"Ignore them, Lexaeus. Let's see what we can do for Number Eight," Vexen motioned to the pathetic Uke of Axel still strapped to the table.

Unfortunately, it seemed, not much. Axel was in an advanced state of emo depression, sobbing despondently and clinging desperately to Lexaeus and Vexen as soon as he was released. "Woxas," he murmured pathetically. "WHERE'S WOXAS?"

"Oh hell. We were hoping you could tell us, Axel," Lexaeus said calmly. "What happened to you? What did he do?"

"I was... it was... where's Woxas?" Axel sobbed. "Woxas... I miss Woxas! I want Woxas to put it up my—"

"Whoa, too much information," Vexen shut him up promptly. "Let's have a look at you... What in the worlds were they trying to do?"

"Extract his Seme," Lexaeus said reasonably. "His signal was that of a Nobody's just before we got here. Now it only reads an Uke."

"That means he must have escaped from the castle before he caught the parasite," Vexen frowned. "The Gutless must have apprehended him somehow and taken him here to get his... you know the hard way."

"D-d-d-d-do you guys know where Woxas is?" Axel whimpered. "V-Vexen, you're

not going to wape me, are you?"

"There they go with the rape again!" Vexen groaned disgustedly. "Is there just something about me that screams 'sexual predator'?"

"It's probably to do with your age," Xaldin said lamely, as he was preparing to interrogate Xiggy-kun and testing just how well the two lances had him pinned to the wall. "I wouldn't take it personally, Vexen. He's obviously not in his right mind."

"Though this situation is somewhat fortunate, actually," Lexaeus said, having a seat on the couch. "If we track down Number Eight's Seme, we have his Uke here as well, rather than back at the castle, as is the case for Xigbar. We can perform a little experiment and figure out how to restore a Nobody who's lost their... you know."

"Brilliant idea, Lexaeus," Vexen smiled. "I *do* love an experiment."

"In the meantime, we have bigger fish to fry," Xaldin approached Xigbar's Seme, his sideburns looking like they meant business. "You're going to tell us all about your species, Seme, and how we can restore our fallen comrades to their former selves."

"As *if*," Xiggy-kun snickered, and made a mocking expression. "You dudes ain't gonna make me do ANYTHING. I ain't scared o' you."

"Aren't you?" Xaldin drew one of his lances and held the business end of it dangerously close to Xiggy-kun's nether regions. "I suggest you start talking, Seme, or we'll have a dissection in addition to our little experiment later on."

"DUDE, NOT THAT!" Xiggy-kun lost all semblance of composure, "YOU AIN'T GONNA TAKE MY WEE-WHACKA-DOO, DUDES! PLEASE! I'LL DO ANYTHING!"

"Weakness: ... you know," Vexen took notes, wanting to know as much as possible.

"... Wee-whacka-doo?" Lexaeus didn't want to know, at all.

"And what happens if you do take a direct hit in the... you know?" Xaldin queried.

Xiggy-kun's horrified expression said it all.

"They die," Vexen sneered and wrote it down.

"Splendid. How convenient for us! And once you die, Seme, will our comrades be

restored or must we take another step in urging them back to their former selves?" Xaldin continued, circling Xiggy-kun's No-No Place with the point of his lance.

"Y'know, dude, I ain't sure," Xiggy-kun looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Then we proceed, blindly, in the noble pursuit of science and knowledge," Xaldin said dramatically, glancing over his shoulder. "Vexen, Lexaeus, could one of you bring me the nearest closable container you can find? Preferably airtight."

"There's a Tupperware here on the ground," Lexaeus held it up, a small square model with a sea green lid, suitable for tortillas or leftover spaghetti.

Xaldin looked pleased to see it. "Ah, perfect. Then let's see what happens, shall we?"

As excited as the author was to write a scene featuring the graphic castration and subsequent death of an extremely "bishounen" Xigbar, she slowly began to realize that such a frightening, gory thing might attract a lot of unwanted attention from certain internet fetish subcultures. Not that there's anything *wrong* with that, and not that she has any right to bash anybody's personal preferences, but she also has a right to protect her own sanity by preventing such a thing from being rejoiced about in her own fan fiction.

Not to mention there's probably a doujinshi about it somewhere out there.

So, in the manner of all good, dramatic and suspenseful stories, we will now be cutting abruptly away to a different and far less important scene—perhaps involving kittens.

Unfortunately, the author is out of kittens at the present time, so we'll instead head back across the street to Destiny Sanctuary Peak High School Academy Grammar School to check up on our favorite horrible alternate universe characters.

It was currently After School. After School is hands down the most important part of the day to the students of DSPHSAGS, because it only slightly edges out Lunch Time for when the most dramatic, life-shattering events take place. Rather than actually say, going home, the students would frequent the school commons and the courtyard outside the main entrance, "skateboarding", "chatting", "hanging out" or whatever it is you kids do after school these days.

After School today did not hold very much promise for sweet, innocent little Kairi and her friends, who sat under the officially-dubbed "Dork Tree" immersed in their own activities and an in-depth discussion of what they planned to do instead of going to the formal this evening, and also last night's Stargate episode.

"Gosh. Who needs to go to a formal anyway? It's totally retarded okay," Hayner whined, putting the finishing touches on his "VOTE FOR PENCE" sign. "You guys want some tots?"

"Sure," Vivi accepted a small paper cup of Hayner's tater tots, nibbling on them and still staring longingly at Naminé across the way. "B-but still... I-I was thinking I m-might go."

"Vivi-chan! NAN DESU KAN? Domo kawaii arigatou Mr. Roboto!" Pence said incoherently, "Watashi wa totally koibito Naminé-sempai!"

"Aw, Vivi, I know you really have a crush on Naminé and everything," Kairi said gently, patting the younger boy on the shoulder. "But she has a boyfriend. You're only setting yourself up for heartbreak if you try to go after her. Riku and her are *really* close, you know?"

On the other side of the courtyard, Riku was *really* close to touching some hot male upperclassman's thigh as they sat together on a bench under a tree.

"I know," Vivi sighed. "B-but still... wouldn't we make a nice couple? I-I could... t-take her out for dinner... a-and we could go to the conventions together. Sh-she could dress up like Miaka and I could be Tamahome a-and we could kiss for picture poses in the hallways..."

"Iie... Vivi-chan, Naminé-sempai is so gaijin she komo dachi tomo teriyaki sukimura sakura the Rearu Fork Brues," Pence crinkled his nose and shook his head. "Iie iie, no way Jose."

"Gosh, Vivi, that sucks," Hayner shook his head. "Maybe next year I'll make people vote for you, okay."

Vivi sighed sadly. "Th-thanks, Hayner, I guess."

"Aw, cheer up Vivi," Kairi said with a smile. "I've got an idea—let's forget about Naminé and buy some tickets and go as friends, all three of us."

"Four," Vivi corrected.

"Huh? You, me, Hayner..."

"Gosh, Kairi, you forgot Pence," Hayner gestured over his shoulder.

"Pence?" Kairi glanced at the exchange student with an eyebrow raised. "I didn't know Pence hung out with us."

"Yeah, Pence! He's only with us all the time! You're retarded!" Hayner said accusatorily. "GOSH, idiot!"

"Kairi no BAKA! Baka Kairi forgetta Pence-chan existikimori?" Pence looked at her mournfully. "Baka no aho, Kairi! FEERINGSU no wound!"

"Well, God help me, guys, I don't understand anything he says!" Kairi said defensively. "I wasn't sure if he was hanging out with us or just... I don't know... following us around speaking some gangraped version of Japanese to bother us."

"Japanese? There's no such country in this world! Now you're making up geography! Gosh, Kairi," Hayner rolled his eyes in disgust.

As Kairi and her friends continued making witty satirical jabs at irritating fanfic trends, across the courtyard the Popular Kids were putting into motion their bet to turn Kairi into the most popular girl in school.

"Get ready, you guys," Sora said haughtily, hitching up his belt and coating himself with Axe body spray. "I'm gonna knock her off her feet so fast and so hard she'll be popular by the time she gets back up."

"I like, doubt it, okay?" Naminé huffed, filing her nails. "Kairi's WAY too far-gone to have any remote semblance of popularity thrust upon her, am I right, Shnooky?" she smiled ditzily and nudged Riku's foot.

"Huh?" Riku was sidetracked by words like "fast" and "hard" in Sora's last dialogue. "Oh, yeah."

"Last chance, Riku—you got anymore rules or provisions you wanna lay on me?" Sora asked him.

"I'd love to," Riku mumbled distractedly.

"Huh?"

"I mean..." Riku shook his head to regain concentration. "Let's, uh... let's see. You have to take her to the formal tonight..."

"What?" Sora objected suddenly. "B-but I was just planning on *standing* near her, thereby elevating her coolness up and through the roof!"

"That'd be like, way too easy—I say you should make him make her the formal queen, Shnooky!" Naminé suggested, grasping Riku's arm and cuddling it like it was a video iPod with a pink skin.

"Yeah, that's a great idea—Kairi's gotta win formal queen tonight in order for you to win the bet," Riku said with a maniacal grin, eyes alight with imaginations of different scenarios for the kiss- I mean... ass-kicking.

"What? But guys, that's IMPOSSIBLE!" Sora screeched indignantly. "Everybody knows that vote is totally rigged—Olette's gonna win formal queen because she's on student senate!"

"Someone from senate ALWAYS wins the dance royalty, Riku!" a nearby and as-yet-unnamed popular student said, horrified. "It's the way it's always been!"

"Yeah, dude, that ain't fair—Kairi'll never win! The votes have already been counted and incinerated to destroy all evidence!" Sora whined.

"Well you better make up some new ones, then," Naminé teased in a sing-song voice. "There she is sitting under the Dork Tree, Sora! Hurry, go and get her to go to the formal with you!"

"Yeah dude, go!" Riku gently shoved Sora towards his date with destiny, though Sora stopped in mid-stride. "What, chickening out?"

"Uh... no. I need you to take your hands out of my back pockets," Sora complained over his shoulder.

"Oh. How'd those get there?" Riku withdrew his hands from Sora's ass and waited until nobody else was watching to rub them against his cheeks lovingly.

Conversation under the Dork Tree had turned back to G4's coverage of this year's E3 ("Wii totally owned you lamers!") when the three geeks (and maybe Pence, but nobody really knows what he's saying) detected something amiss in the world.

"Do you guys... feel something strange?" Kairi asked the others.

They nodded quickly. "Yeah, i-it's like... something doesn't *belong* here," Vivi murmured.

"Minna-san, sensor no kawaii window no tabamashi yuki ma, watashi wa nana ka ga ju jitsu saruto kotatsu ni wa!" Pence babbled.

"*GOSH*, you guys! There's totally a cool kid under our tree!" Hayner shrieked in terror and pointed at Sora, who'd just arrived.

"Um... may the force be with you, or something," Sora raised his hands in the "Live Long and Prosper" symbol, and scores of nerds across the internet had strokes at the author's careless mangling of fandoms. "Whassup, homies?"

He was met with a lot of blank stares from the others.

"Er... That is to say, I uh... well, I was walkin' through the halls today, with my Notebook of +5 studies... or something," Sora attempted to strike up a lively conversation. "And I was thinking, 'Dude, uh... Xbox totally blows and... uh... OOT was totally the best Metroid game, and, uh... Episode 3 sucks ass, and hey, the formal's tonight, right?' Well, 'formal' in Klingon is 'MAKTALUKA' so I was actually thinking 'MAKTALUKA is tonight!' But anyways, I was thinkin', y'know, I don't have a date or nothin' so, I might like... spent the night at home playing World of Warcraft or somethin', and then I was all, 'Hey, maybe I'll go to the formal!' So uh, hey Kairi, did you maybe wanna be the Leia to my Luke and we totally go together?"

Kairi's friends could only stare in shock, trying to get past the slew of headache-inducing nerd-killing inaccuracies until Kairi finally caught on.

"W-wait a second, Sora," Kairi's eyes widened. "Did you just ask me to go to the formal with you?"

"Uh..." Sora scanned the conversation. "Yeah, I did mention something like that."

There was a moment of stunned silence and Kairi's eyes narrowed. "Who's paying you, and how much?"

"Huh? Oh, nobody's paying me," Sora shook his head rapidly. "Honest!"

"There's no WAY a self-centered asshole jock like you would want to ask a geek like me to go to the most important formal dance of the year next to prom and homecoming!" Kairi glared at him suspiciously. "There's gotta be some kind of catch—what's your game, Wanahakaruugi?" She stood up and poked him in the

chest, a no-nonsense glare on her face.

"Football and lacrosse and field hockey and soccer and baseball and football," Sora replied proudly.

Kairi did not seem impressed. "No, you know what I mean! What's up? Are you gonna kidnap me and humiliate me and leave my body on the football field like some kind of bad CSI episode? Dump pig's blood on me? Do you owe somebody money? Or is this some kind of twisted bet from that obviously gay goth kid and if you don't make me the most popular girl in school in an extremely short span of time, he's gonna make out with you against your will?"

"Huh? No way!" Sora burst out laughing at the last suggestion. "Dude, that's ridiculous! I just thought... y'know... that the whole clique situation we have going on at this school is... y'know, kinda sad. So I figured I'd make the first step and reach out my hand to promote unity among our peers, resulting in more cooperation, tolerance and higher school spirit, connecting us all in our hearts with fond memories of our harmonious high school days?" His voice rose into a hopeful squeak.

"Bullshit!" Vivi roared.

"Gosh, you guys are retarded!" Hayner rolled his eyes.

"BAKA DESU!" Pence screamed excitedly. "WASABI!"

"And also my mom rented a limo," Sora shrugged.

"OH MY GOD A LIMO!" Kairi's eyes lit up and she nearly tackled him. "OF COURSE I'LL GO TO THE FORMAL WITH YOU! YAY! I'M SO HAPPY!"

As Kairi cried into Sora's shoulder about feeling like a princess and having all her dreams come true, Sora maneuvered her to turn around so he could shoot Riku a thumbs-up over her shoulders. Riku sighed dreamily.

This all concluded with a horrified scream from out in the parking lot where unfortunate little Larry Klein stumbled upon his father and Ms. Larxene *in flagrante delicto* in the front seat of Mr. Klein's pickup truck. Larry would later require nine years of psychological therapy, and would eventually suffer a massive nervous breakdown and rename himself Shirley, moving to a distant tropical island and selling overpriced Ray-Bans to tourists for the rest of his days.

Time to cut back to the characters we (and by we, I mean the author) actually care about, and also a few hours ahead. The author craves whiskey.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus had been gone from the prose for several pages, and for the sake of the plot, several hours. There are a number of things they could have been doing during this long stretch—and no, "each other" is not a viable suggestion. Shut up and go Google it if you're so desperate, horndog. There'll be none of that *here*.

In fact, they had utilized what remained of Xiggy-kun's laboratory in apartment 304 to do a little impromptu experimentation on what resulted from the gory end of Xiggy-kun—for symbolic purposes a glowing purple substance that resembled the popular depiction of a soul, a misty blob of *something*. This was, as a matter of fact, Xigbar's... you know.

Were this fanfiction a video game, they would have momentarily seen a "you got an item" screen where the item was called "2x Xigbar Stone".

Enjoy that imagery in your nightmares.

It was currently safely enclosed inside the Tupperware that Lexaeus had found earlier, carefully stuck in whatever interdimensional backpack also holds the Organization's weapons when not in use. Tests had shown that it would not spoil and would not vanish away, and as long as they kept it enclosed and away from any freaky accidents it would not re-manifest itself into Xiggy-kun. Our heroes could keep it safe until they were able to return it to the World That Never Was and back into Xigbar where it belonged.

For the time being, though, there was a more important mission—they must find and destroy Aku-chan before he escaped, summoned a large number of stronger Gutless, or worse, found a way to come through on his goal of Ukefying even more hapless victims.

Once things at room 304 had been properly cleaned up and sealed away, the signal in the back of the guidebook began to blink incessantly, leading our heroes back to...

"Oh hell," Lexaeus muttered. He was carrying the guidebook in one hand and Axel's pathetic, mercifully unconscious body in the other. The first person who likens Axel to a damsel in distress and writes an adorable yaoi fanfic to go along with this image will receive a brick to the face.

"Mmm... Woxas, stick your tongue in my ear..." Axel murmured stupidly. Lexaeus mercifully knocked him out cold.

"No. No. NO. Absolutely not!" Vexen snarled, shaking his head rapidly. "I refuse!"

"We must remain strong in the face of trial, gentlemen," Xaldin didn't look exactly thrilled either as they stood on the football field again—they had been on their way back to Destiny Hooby Whatty High School, but were distracted by the crowds of headlights and the colorful banner now festooning the outside of the gymnasium.

"ANNUAL SPRING FLING FORMAL PROM HOP" it read.

"A high school dance. You will never find a more wretched hive of angst and triviality," Vexen lamented. "And yet, we're picking up the signal of Axel's Seme from within. Our luck today is astounding."

"We must stop Number Eight's Seme from wreaking havoc, Vexen," Lexaeus told him sternly. "If he has something planned—say, transforming all the male students of the school into Gutless, we could have a real problem on our hands and our... you knows."

"Let's make this an in-and-out affair, shall we?" Xaldin suggested. "After all, now that we know the Seme's weak point, we just need to destroy Axel's Seme, then we can see about restoring Number Eight here back to his original state. And besides, it can't be *that* bad in there."

"I was wrong," Xaldin corrected himself as they entered the gym, subject to the sight of strobe lights and squirming, grinding teenagers; the smell of perspiration, BO and body spray potpourri; and the sounds of some shrieking bird-woman squawking about humps and checking out her lady lumps, whatever the hell those are.

"Hurry up with that signal, Lexaeus!" Vexen was getting quite annoyed, as horny teenagers kept grinding into him.

"It's getting stronger, and it seems to be coming from somewhere beyond that mass of students," Lexaeus had to yell over the music, gesturing to the far end of the room. He set Axel's body down in a chair for safe-keeping, and rolled up his sleeves. "We'd better start digging."

Our three heroes set themselves to pushing and plowing through the writhing mass of sweaty high schoolers.

Somewhere within the mass, Kairi and Sora were actually having a fairly good time together. Kairi had endured an unnecessarily extreme makeover at the hands of Naminé earlier that evening, and was wearing probably too much makeup for a girl of her age—nevertheless, she did look quite pretty, and even Quarterback Captain of the Football Team Jock Mr. Popular Sora had to admit... when she wasn't doing weird things like *studying* or *finishing her homework* or *watching sci-fi marathons* or *wearing glasses*, she was quite attractive and... dare he say it? He may have been falling for her!

Kairi, on the other hand, was beginning to grow enamored of Sora's ridiculously stupid comments, his slow wit, his inability to go without mentioning sports for ten minutes at a time, his perfectly white teeth and his adorable virginal naïveté. A slow song was rapidly approaching and she was highly considering letting Sora dance with her during it—rather than the usual trick of giggling, commenting on how lame the song is, and standing awkwardly two feet apart staring at each other without touching until the song ended.

A short distance away, Naminé was getting a little frustrated with Riku. He'd been behaving SO well so far... he'd worn a tux and a pink tie (that PERFECTLY matched her dress), he'd left his hair hanging in his face like it looked best, and he seemed dedicated to spending the entire evening with her...

Aside from the fact he was staring forlornly across the gym the entire time, whispering unsettling things like "Mm, you'd look so good in my shirt" and "I wish I could be your redheaded Princess of Heart".

"It's almost time for the royalty announcements," Naminé whispered to Riku. "We'll see if Sora owes us money!"

"Money?" Riku mumbled. "I didn't bet him money."

"You didn't?" Naminé looked stunned. "Then... what did you bet him?"

"I said I'd kick his ass if he didn't," Riku replied.

Many things happened all at once exactly as Riku spoke—if just one little event had changed, maybe things wouldn't have gone as badly as they did but, well, they didn't, they did, and here we are.

As Riku opened his mouth to speak, a small amount of saliva built up in the back of his mouth, causing his tongue to slip when he pronounced "kick". It created a hissing sound, which made the word come out more like "kiss".

Which is, of course, what Riku was really thinking right then, but beside the point.

As Riku opened his mouth to speak, the last notes of the last song faded out and the gym had fallen silent for only a second as the next CD cued itself up over on the DJ's turntable. This created a perfect theater for Riku's comment, "I said I'd kick(ss) his ass if he didn't," to echo all across the gym, quite loudly.

Of course, Riku was dating the most popular girl in school, so everybody knew who the "he" he was referring to was—his bet with Sora was a fairly popular story and everybody seemed to know about it except for Kairi.

As Riku opened his mouth to speak, Sora and Kairi had been in the middle of a heartfelt discussion on how surprised they were at how well they got along. This led to a moment of them staring into one another's eyes, and in that silent moment, it occurred to both of them that it was time for a kiss.

Let us return to the proper course of events, right after Riku's fateful comment echoed across the gym.

Naminé was an oblivious girl, but not so oblivious she couldn't hear and know about the rumors of her boyfriend being the biggest closet case in the school. As Riku threatened to "kiss" Sora for losing the bet, something cracked within her. Suddenly, all the rumors seemed true.

"Kiss him?" Naminé's eyes flew open. "You want to *kiss* Sora?"

"What? No, of course I don't—" Riku stumbled.

"YOU'RE GAY!" Naminé finally shrieked. "EVERYBODY'S RIGHT ABOUT YOU, RIKU! YOU'RE TOTALLY GAY!"

"No I'm NOT!" Riku went pale and tried to defend himself, but unfortunately ruined his argument in mid-sentence by happening to glance back over at Kairi and Sora and seeing them about three inches from kissing.

In the silence of the room, he could hear Sora mumbling, "This'll be my first."

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Riku screamed dramatically and hurled himself through

the crowd of people, tackling Sora only moments before he and Kairi had their mutual first kiss and knocking the football player to the floor beneath him.

Kairi could only stare in shock as Riku stood up hurriedly, muttering, "I just didn't! I'm not gay seriously don't everybody stare at me like that!"

"Riku, what on earth are you doing?" Kairi cried out.

"I'll tell you what!" Naminé appeared beside her like a bat out of hell. "Riku's GAY!"

"... Duh," Kairi and about half the student body muttered.

"Not ONLY is Riku gay and not ONLY has he humiliated me on the most important night of my life except for homecoming and prom and maybe my wedding!" Naminé roared, "But he made a bet with Sora that Sora couldn't make you the most popular girl in school in one day! And if Sora lost, RIKU WAS GOING TO KISS HIM!"

Kairi's jaw dropped and she stared in horror down at Sora. "Wh-what? Sora, is this true?"

"I... I..." Sora was still a little distracted, what with being taken out by a brawny goth kid only seconds earlier. "Well yeah, but..."

"YOU BASTARD!" Kairi shrieked. "I knew there was a catch! You didn't like me at all, you just asked me to the formal on a dare! How could you do this to me? I was starting to trust you! I hate you, Sora Wanahakaruugi!"

"I'll never forgive you for making a fool of me, Riku!" Naminé burst into tears.

"I'm NOT GAY!" Riku screamed.

"NO KAIRI!" Sora sobbed. "It was all for the money, at first, but—but I changed my mind! I love you! And dare or no, I want you to be my girlfriend!"

"NOOOOOOOOO!" Riku screamed again.

"Oh Sora! Do you mean it?" Kairi whispered.

"Yes Kairi, I mean it!" Sora nodded sincerely.

"I'M SORRY I DOUBTED YOU!" Kairi whimpered and pulled Sora to his feet,

hugging him tightly as they kissed.

"And the King and Queen of this year's Spring Fling Formal Prom Hop are Sora Wanahakaruugi and Kairi Tsukihimemiyakage!" a random senate member called over the microphone.

Olette was currently upstairs burning down the senate office.

"K-Kairi!" Vivi had been conveniently nearby throughout this exchange, "What the heck is wrong with you? How could you let this jerk humiliate you and take advantage of you like this, and then forgive him seconds later?"

"THE REEARU FOOORKU BERUUUSU!" Pence howled unintelligibly. "HOONTOU NO!"

"Gosh, Kairi!" Hayner snapped, "What happened to your brain?"

"Jeez, Sora!" Naminé was distraught and ready to take her anger out on just about anybody. "What happened to your nuts?"

"Ooh, sorry, I'll be needing those!" a very sinister voice rang out across the gym.

From behind the DJ booth in an explosion of fire appeared Aku-chan, wielding his chakrams with a large, disturbing lava lamp set on the table behind him. The students screamed in terror and all backed away from the scary man, except for Riku who was distraught and on the rebound.

"HEYO KIDDOS! The name's Aku-chan! A-K-U-C-H-A-N! GOT IT MEMORIZED?" Aku-chan howled with laughter, releasing a fire spell that closed all the students inside it and confined them to a small heap. "And I hate to be rainin' down on your happy little high school thingy here, but my boss, the Grand Master Fangirl requests the usage of all your... you knows!"

"But some of us are *girls*!" protested one girl in the front. "We don't have... you knows!"

"Don't worry, babe... I'll be dealin' with you lovely ladies in as well," Aku-chan winked seductively at her, "Cuz we of the Gutless don't discriminate our reign of terror by gender! Got it memorized?"

"Yeah, we got it memorized," the sheepish students repeated.

"On behalf of the Grand Master Fangirl and ALL of us at Orgy IX, I'd like to welcome you to our Gutless army!" Aku-chan held up the lava lamp and plugged the other end into a nearby power bar. The contents of the lamp began to hum and churn turbulently, emitting a bright purple glow all across the gym. Male students screamed in torture and clung pathetically to their friends and dates, complaining of a terrible pain in their... you know. Female students began to feel awfully bitchy and unnecessarily abusive. A few felt like they were about to die in a tragic accident that would leave their boyfriends no choice but to heal their mental anguish with lots of sex of the male-male variety. Some felt as though soon, they wouldn't exist at all.

Except for Riku, who was oddly not affected by either affliction.

And just as the collective... you know of the student body began to condense as a mist up in midair, the flames on all sides of the gym were extinguished with a sudden burst of deep blue ice crystals.

"WHUTHUFUDGE?" Aku-chan snarled, backing away and narrowly avoiding being sealed within an ice crystal himself. "WHAT'S GOIN' ON?"

"As much as I'd love to see this insipid hellhole burned to the ground, if you're going to make up a high school AU, you might as well do it decently," a cool, vicious voice snapped from the darkness. Vexen appeared from the shadows, wielding his shield of ice and firing abrupt rounds of icicles at the Seme menace and his equipment.

"YOU!" Aku-chan cried, leaping nimbly out of the way of the ice attacks rushing towards him. "You dumbass! Don't you realize it's too late? I've become something new, something BETTER! I've become something real! I CREATED this world!"

He lunged towards Vexen, flaming chakrams spinning wildly and only barely deflecting off his shield. "With my powers—with the powers of the Gutless, this domain is OURS! Got it memorized? This school, these students, this entire world, ALL of Fandom Hearts is under our control, the Orgy's control, the control of the Grand Master Fangirl! Don't you see? You could be a part of something so much more, so much bigger, if you'd ONLY cooperate!"

"I'd rather *die*!" Vexen seemed to take extreme offense at this suggestion. "I'd rather be killed than lose my... you know and become a simpering wuss like the others, or a psychotic sex fiend like you!"

"That's too bad," Aku-chan sneered, knocking Vexen back with a strong attack and turning to the hoards of half-Gutless students. "GUTLESS! Tear them limb from

limb! Got it memorized?"

The halfway mindless students looked as though they were about to advance on Vexen, but they were stopped suddenly by a fence of six lances. A fierce wind tore through the gym, urging the suffering students back and away from the Seme and tearing down decorations into a great tumultuous whirlwind of shrapnel and debris, including the lava lamp, which shattered into a million glowing pieces.

"Your plots are recycled, your character archetypes are trite and unoriginal, and your dramatic attempts are unconvincing, weak and desperate at best," Xaldin added, standing on the other side of the gym from Vexen.

"Thanks for buttin' in! NOT!" Aku-chan had two chakrams, exactly enough to send them wildly flipping and flying at both Vexen and Xaldin, who concentrated on fending them off with their weapons. "I hate it when people show up an' ruin my fun!"

"Where's the fun in this?" Xaldin sneered, and six lances sunk into the floor, creating a temporary cage-of-sorts around the Seme.

The lances suddenly flew off in all directions. The DJ booth rose off the ground as did the floorboards, riding a wave of rock and earth that jutted up from the floor like a mountain. "You have been evilly spawned from one of our comrades—you are no longer fit to live or exist in this or any other world," Lexaeus raised his hand and Aku-chan was lifted up on an enveloping quagmire of rocks and dirt, slowly sealing him within. "In short, your plan is a failure and your time is up."

"WHUTTHUFUDGE! That ain't fair!" Aku-chan squirmed against the rocks that were sealing his hands bound behind him and his feet to the ground, lifting him and the shards of the lava lamp high into the air.

"We don't exactly play fair, Seme," Lexaeus shrugged with a smirk.

"NOOO!" Aku-chan screamed and thrashed, fighting the ceaseless tide of earth that was slowly engulfing him, pulling his arms backwards and immobilizing him face-up. "YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME! I'll make you scream and beg me for mercy! MERCY! Got it memorized? I'LL DOMINATE YOU, EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU!"

"Oh, so sorry, 'Aku-chan'," Vexen approached the Seme from behind, coating one of his hands in a blade of ice. "But I don't think you have the nuts for it."

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" Riku shrieked from the crowd of students. "BUT I LOVE

HIM!"

"No you *don't*," Vexen snapped, and the prose cut away in time to hear, but not witness, Aku-chan's final moments.

"NYAAAAAAAAAARRRRGGGGGHHH! ROXAS! ROXAS! WHERE ARE YOU WHEN I NEED YOU, ROXAS! AAAAAAAAAARRRGGGGGGGHHH!"

Shwwwwwoooooo-POP!

Shhhhlup.

"Got it," Xaldin held up the Tupperware triumphantly, two glowing purple somethings floating gently within.

Next thing the students of Destiny Sanctuary Peak High School Academy Middle School knew, some hapless DJ was struggling to get another CD on the turntable as they snapped out of whatever silent trance they'd been in.

"Wh... what happened?" Sora muttered, rubbing his eyes. "My... OW... my groin hurts!"

"Mine too," Vivi murmured.

"Mine too," Hayner agreed.

"RETSUU GO GEKIGANGAR VOI!" Pence shouted.

"What were we doing?" Kairi asked.

"I... I don't remember. But I have this feeling," Naminé whispered. "Cliques are stupid. We should have fun and all hang out together as a big group of friends tonight."

"That's a great idea, Naminé!" Riku agreed, copping a feel of Sora's ass.

"It certainly is. Because, you know, no matter what clique or in group we belong to here in high school, after graduation it won't matter anymore," Sora said sagely. "We'll all be out in the real world holding down shitty jobs for meager pay and a lame middle class status quo. So, we might as well make the best of things while

we're still here in our stupid little fantasy mini-real world, here at Destiny Sanctuary Peak Academy Buttercup Daisy Brightening High School."

A soulful background melody played. It was probably "Graduation" by Vitamin C.

"Yeah, I bet you didn't know all the students at this school were professionally trained dancers!" Olette cut in from nearby, smelling of gasoline and burnt matches.

"HEY!" Riku said accusatorily. "Not Another Teen Movie!"

"Donde esta la biblioteca? La biblioteca esta allí! Donde esta Pedro? Pedro esta en la biblioteca! Pedro esta allí!" Pence said wisely.

"Wow. Wicked awesome party," Hayner wheezed and eyed all the trashed floorboards and decorations. "Wanna see my sweet dance moves?"

They did. They all did.

Meanwhile, up on the G.S. Existentialist, Lexaeus set the ship's course on its way to the next world while Xaldin and Vexen decided to see about rescuing Axel from his predicament or, if worst came to worst, putting him out of his misery.

They laid the unconscious Uke out on a convenient table, and Xaldin clutched the Tupperware in hand and made an expression of deep concentration. "We'll have to be careful. If we're lucky the thing will take back to its rightful place without our help, but we must be ready for anything."

"Let it be known that should this ever happen to me, if you can't get my... you know back within twenty minutes, I want you to take me out," Vexen said, glaring with disgust at Axel's new fashion choice. "Disgusting, what those Gutless will do in pursuit of a thrill."

"By the way, no one is to hear of this moment. It doesn't leave the ship," Xaldin warned them.

"Don't worry, Xaldin," Lexaeus assured him, "I doubt any of us could even muster the nerve to talk about such a thing."

"Good," Xaldin opened the Tupperware and held it towards Axel's unconscious body. The room filled up with a purple light and a soft, wispy purple something rose

from the crack in the container's lid.

As Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus watched in awe, it twisted and curled on itself through the air and immediately seemed to recognize where it was going. It immediately zipped towards Axel and absorbed itself into him, and were it able to speak would have let out a joyous cry of "I'M HOME! I'M HOME! HOME AT LAST!"

The author apologizes for that mental image, actually.

Suddenly, Axel winced in pain and flinched, clutching his sore groin as his eyes fluttered open. "Agh! OW! What the hell? Gah... Vexen? Xaldin? Lex? What the hell..."

"I have to wonder if you really want to know, Number Eight," Lexaeus told him.

"Good to see you back to your old self, Axel," Xaldin smirked.

"Back to... whaddya mean?" Axel sat up slowly and ran his fingers through his blood red hair, still looking quite out of it. "All I can remember's... Roxas was actin' all weird, then everybody else started actin' all weird, so I made a break for it... Then I got to Hollow Bastion and all these weird little Heartless-lookin' things..."

"As we thought," Vexen nodded with a triumphant smile, writing down Axel's account in his notebook.

"And am I nuts, or was there a really pretty Xigbar running around there for a little while?" Axel rubbed his head, mildly horrified at the thought.

"To make a very long story short, our Organization is under attack by an army of Gutless. They have stolen the... you know of most of the other members, kidnapped two of them and yourself, and they're setting off a plan to take over the universe," Lexaeus said evenly.

"Oh," Axel muttered.

"Important question, Axel," Xaldin cut in, "When was the last time you saw Roxas? He's disappeared from the castle and we fear the Gutless may have kidnapped him."

Before the author puts down Axel's reply, she will have you know that for this story, and for all future intents and purposes of hers, Axel and Roxas are best friends. Friends. Without benefits. Buddies. Pals. Chums. Cronies. Comrades. Not lovers. No kissing. No sex. Nothing but friendship. Stop reading into it right now. It

won't change. Ever.

Proceed.

"Jeez, I don't know," Axel looked suddenly alarmed. "We were up in my room playin' on the PS2, and suddenly he starts... I don't know, but he was acting weird. I noticed the big-ass bite mark on his hand, and I figured I'd go tell Superior or somethin', see if he knew anything. But when I got out in the hallway..."

"The Gutless," Vexen murmured.

"Well, only like one or two," Axel shrugged. "But I didn't know what they were, so I teleported my ass out of there. Went to Hollow Bastion, figuring maybe I could catch my breath there and then head back to see Superior but, uh... dumb idea, in retrospect. So you say they got Roxas?"

"Yes, but as we found you, we'll find him, and Number Twelve as well," Lexaeus said optimistically.

"Axel, I've got a favor to ask you," Xaldin said. "I want you to go back to the castle and keep an eye on things."

"What? I ain't going back in there! They'll get me again!" Axel snapped indignantly.

"No, no. You ought to have gained immunity from the Gutless and their parasite," Vexen assured him. "Do me a favor, find a camera and take some pictures, would you?"

"Pictures? Of what?" Axel raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, trust me, you'll figure something out," Vexen smiled darkly.

"Do try not to laugh at them too hard?" Xaldin sighed. "After all, you had your moments too."

"Stand near the DEM engine, Number Eight, and we'll teleport you back to the castle," Lexaeus prepared to smack the red button.

"Yeah, okay, but where are you guys going?" Axel scratched his head.

"To the next world," Xaldin said, his voice brash and determined. "We've no time

to waste. We must continue onward bravely, no matter what trials we may face..."

The ship was engulfed in a white light, and the occupants vanished for their respective destinations.

"Look at it this way. Nothing could be worse than the high school AU," Xaldin said.

"I was wrong," he said dismally about twenty seconds later as they landed in the next world.

What could POSSIBLY be worse than a high school AU?

Well, wouldn't you like to know. See you next chapter!

APOLOGIES AND OBSERVATIONS:

My Chemical Romance is really not that bad. They're worse.

I'm sorry, Riku... I'm so sorry.

Spot the Other Video Game References and Win a Cookie! (hint: UMBILICAL CORD!1!)

The Author Must've Spent

Chapter Four: The Author Must've Spent a Little More Time On You

Our universe is an odd place, full of many strange and mysterious things that can cause wonderment or confusion—and oftentimes pure, straight, chilling fear.

The idea of "fear" differs from person to person. Some fear the abstract—things such as death, the afterlife, and finding out the meaning of their existence is just to deliver a pizza to a distant world, be eaten by Heartless and then to cease existing soon afterwards (Demyx, the Organization's Number Nine, used to have this fear). Some fear the concrete—insects, snakes, the deep end of the swimming pool, high places. Others fear things that appear in their imaginations—flaming zombies wielding chainsaws—and some fear the very idea of things, such as a rumor of Britney Spears switching to an acting career and being cast in the lead role of a Janis Joplin biographical film.

But some fears are universal. Some fears are so intense, so terrible and so frightening, they can strike the cores of even beings who are incapable of feeling emotion to any extent beyond a logical standpoint.

And what Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus witnessed upon their arrival in the next world certainly fell under that category.

At first, it appeared just like any other ordinary suburban neighborhood, but only at first. Rows and rows of cute cookie-cutter ranch houses and the odd apartment building lined streets full of green trees, children rode their bikes in the street and elderly people watered and worked in their gardens. In the distance, a high school—but not one of Destiny Sanctuary blah blah blah caliber, as it appeared very ordinary—stood proudly with an oversized flag flapping in the wind, and a park was set off to the side of it. It could not have been a more unlikely place for an adventure to begin...

This contrasted the overwhelming stench of *Destiny* wafting through the air.

It also contrasted the teenage girl currently standing before our heroes. Her name was Sakura-Rose Sunblossom Orange Juice Annie-Marie McFate. She wore a shimmering sailor outfit ripped straight from the cels of a magical girl anime in all the colors of the rainbow and a long silver cape that went all the way down to the

tips of her glowing gold stiletto-heeled boots. Her hair was the deepest raven and braided all the way down to her knees, and her eyes sparkled like amethyst orbs. The weapon in her hand was unmistakably a Keyblade, shining silver and gold and plastered with a rainbow of colorful sequins, diamonds, rubies and sapphires.

Sakura-Rose pointed the Keyblade in a straight line at our heroes, drawing it across the group in a threatening manner and smiling a pearly-white grin that spoke of overconfidence. "Halt, evil-doers! You'll not live to terrorize any more innocent people under my watch!"

"*Sweet eternal mother of darkness*," Lexaeus took a step back, his stomach roiling with nausea.

"Ha! See? Look how you tremble and shudder in fear at the very sight of my pure, righteous heart! I'm the chosen Keyblade bearer, you know!" Sakura-Rose laughed heartily and struck a pose suitable for an action figure. One of those super-detailed ones you can't actually pose or move at all.

Beads of sweat began to form on Xaldin's brow and his sideburns were on their guard, backing away alongside Lexaeus and muttering, "That's not... it can't be..."

"*They're not supposed to be real!*" Vexen hissed, sticking close to his comrades.

"But it *is*. It's real—it's..." Lexaeus stammered.

"**A Mary Sue**," the three of them gasped in horror.

"HEY! I am SO not a Mary Sue!" Sakura-Rose halted her threatening charge and triumphantly righteous speech, placing her hands on her hips in protest. "I have FLAWS! Like my stepdaddy beats me and he's SOOO MEAN! And I only got second place in my school spelling bee, and my class rank is only 3rd out of 247!"

"What do we do—what do we do?" Xaldin understood something was very wrong the moment he began to panic. "She's got a Keyblade—she's going to *destroy* us!"

"N-now stay calm! Everybody just stay calm!" Vexen, too, was starting to freak out.

Lexaeus had panicked so badly he backed completely away from the situation—and it was only once he was outside a small radius of the girl he began to think clearly again. He glanced back up at his two comrades with sudden realization. "Xaldin, Vexen! Back away from her!"

"BUT SHE'S GOING TO KILL US!" Xaldin shrieked in horror.

"Here, just—" Surely risking his life, Lexaeus inched as close to his comrades as he dared before grabbing them by the hoods and yanking them back out of the way.

Once there had been some distance gained between them and Sakura-Rose, Xaldin and Vexen seemed to return to their senses and blinked, still backing away from the girl ever approaching them with her Keyblade drawn.

"What's happened to us?" Xaldin demanded of Vexen, who took a moment to poke around in the index of the guidebook. "Why do we turn so pathetic if we go even near that girl?"

"It's her species, Xaldin," Vexen pointed to the tattoo on Sakura-Rose's midriff, one that eerily matched the ones they had seen marked on the Preppy Gutless in the previous world. "She's a Mary Sue Gutless. Approaching her will subject us to the illogical reality of her existence—she is apparently smarter, stronger and better than all three of us put together—in her own delusional little world. But she possesses the power to make others in the vicinity think so too."

"She doesn't look like the other Gutless," Lexaeus noted. "It's almost as though she was once human."

"Not human," Vexen shook his head, gritting his teeth in disgust. "She was once an ordinary denizen of this world... the Gutless infected her and transformed her into that creature."

"The denizens of this world aren't human?" Xaldin asked incredulously.

"No... they're not real at all. Unfortunately we may be seeing a great deal of other creatures like this one," Vexen tilted his head at her. "It seems we've landed in..."

THE CITY OF OC

"Oh-see?" Lexaeus attempted.

"I'd actually pronounce it 'ock', there in the back of the throat," Xaldin offered.

"It doesn't matter—this world is ten times more dangerous than the last," Vexen sneered. "And what's worse, I'm picking up the presence of a Nobody."

"One of ours?" Lexaeus asked quickly.

"It seems so," Vexen's eyes narrowed. "I hate to think what might have happened to them..."

"Let's not. We've got bigger things to worry about at the moment," Xaldin gestured back at Sakura-Rose, who was still making her relentless charge.

"You evil Organization guys will learn better than to mess with MY neighborhood!" Sakura-Rose giggled, and sprinted towards them with her Keyblade drawn.

"Right... we'll just have to kill the creature while remaining a good distance away from her," Vexen said, attempting to remain calm and urging the others to join him in backing away.

"Now, is this species stronger than the Gutless we've seen before, defensively?" Lexaeus asked Vexen.

"Doesn't look like it."

"Then allow me," Lexaeus pulled out his tomahawk and urged the others away from him.

"Ah! Then a one-on-one fight it shall be? Very well! TEE HEE!" Sakura-Rose stopped in her tracks and waved her Keyblade menacingly at Number Five, her violet-hued orbs gazing at him with a steely, heroic glare that spoke of righteousness and goodness and a vast knowledge of Orlando Bloom's acting roles. "You'll never defeat me, you hideous beast, because I represent all that is pure and good and light in the world, and YOU are an evil creature with no heart and I have a heart and it holds nothing but love for ALL LIVING THINGS! And you'll never be able to scare me, either! My will is as strong as stone!"

"Really?" Lexaeus asked lamely, and with the slightest movement of his hand, Sakura-Rose was crushed to death beneath two tons of irony and a gigantic summoned slab of rock.

"Well done, Lexaeus. I rather enjoyed the timing," Xaldin complimented him with a good-natured slap on the shoulder.

"I thought you would," Lexaeus stretched his shoulder and leaned on his tomahawk casually.

"Is that it? Is it... dead?" Vexen took a few uneasy steps towards the slab, tilting his head to better see what had become of the Gutless.

As the Gutless gave her final squeals of agony squished against the pavement, there was an explosion of what appeared to be rainbow-colored glitter. It poofed out from beneath the rock and scattered across the street, causing all three of our heroes to leap back for caution's sake.

Things once again appeared to be quiet in the ordinary suburb.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus approached what remained of the Gutless and very carefully, Xaldin picked up a pinch of the glittery substance, examining it with a discerning eye. "I wonder what this is?" he asked. "Perhaps the source of the Mary Sue's mind-altering powers?"

"Fascinating," Vexen jotted down his observations. "Gentlemen, do you realize what this means?"

"What?"

"It means, if we take this substance to a properly safe location and perform some tests on it, we might be able to create an antidote to the Mary Sue's effects! I'd feel much safer tracking down the source of this Nobody signal if that were the case," Vexen sneered, triumphant in his idea.

"A splendid idea, Vexen," Lexaeus knelt down and began scraping the glitter into a convenient little bottle he'd found in his pocket. "Let's investigate that small shopping center up ahead, shall we? Perhaps there is a hardware store or somewhere we could get the proper supplies."

"Let's not waste any time then," Xaldin eyed their surroundings with an unpleasant grimace on his face. "Another one of those... things could pop up at any time."

Kain Bakayorou was an ordinary fifteen-year-old kid who lived in an ordinary house with his mom and younger sister. He had spikey hair that started out the same brown color of a bird's nest but it graduated to turquoise as it crossed his scalp, and also red eyes. He liked skateboarding, rap-metal and pulled mostly B's and C's in school... he was basically just an ordinary kid.

This of course meant he was destined for much greater things and would soon be sucked into a conflict beyond all his previous understanding. This of course meant that he would soon be forced to undertake the great task of saving the world.

This particular day, Kain was just getting out of school. He passed through the schoolyard, waving hello to his good buddy Sora, and set about on walking on his way home. He went down the street and through the shopping center bordering the suburbs of the City of OC where he lived, and then decided to take a shortcut through the back alley—it led right back to the suburbs, after all. As he passed by the door that opened into the back room of Sanford & Son's Hardware and Biology Supplies Ltd, he overheard several strange voices involved in a suspicious conversation. Being that he was only an ordinary boy, he *had* to listen.

"These should work perfectly. This substance seems to create some kind of chemical reaction when it gets close to another one of the Mary Sue Gutless... not only does it nullify their mind-altering powers, but it weakens them greatly."

"Any guesses on why?"

"I'd assume that the two Mary Sues' chemicals cannot be too close to one another—after all, each one is supposedly 'the best'. If exposed too long to another Sue's powers, both of them might explode."

"Into bloody chunks?"

"We can only hope."

"*Eeeexcellent*. Hand me another of those little bottles, Lexaeus."

"There you are, Vexen."

"Thank you. Now, if we each keep a small container of this in our pockets, we ought to be immune to the Mary Sue's powers—then all we have to worry about is their pathetic plastic Keyblades, which shouldn't be any problem at all."

"Good. Now we can get down to business hunting for that Nobody and get the hell off of this forsaken hellhole world."

Kain's eyes widened as big as saucers and he backed up towards the other side of the alley, trying to piece together all that he'd just heard. Nobodies? Mary Sues?

Key... blade?

"What on earth is a Keyblade?" he asked himself out loud, and was surprised to hear three other voices echoing the same question.

Kain looked up abruptly and found he was not alone—three other perfectly ordinary teenagers were crowded into the alley with them and had somehow been eavesdropping, all without noticing one another.

The four eyed each other uncomfortably for a few seconds before a long platinum-haired, amber-eyed punk-looking sort of fellow spoke up.

"What are *you* guys doing here?"

"What do you mean, what are WE doing here?" a cornsilk yellow platinum amber blonde girl with sapphire cobalt aquamarine cornflower silk lily midnight blue eyes and a fully outfitted wardrobe from Wet Seal placed her hands on her hips and glared at the others. "What are YOU doing here?"

"Hey—I don't know about you guys," the third boy, whose name was Turbo Hihibaba, with hair the color of #99CC66 and periwinkle eyes raised his hands defensively, "But I had a prophetic dream last night in which I overheard a suspicious conversation in the back of the Hardware and Biology Supplies store, and then I was sucked up into a mystical portal where I found out that I was destined to be the Keybearer!"

"No way!" the first boy, whose name was Raven Ikareponchi snapped. "**I've** been having creepy hallucinations during gym class in which I overhear a suspicious conversation in the back of the Hardware and Biology Supplies store and then get sucked into a mystical portal where I find out that I am destined to be the Keybearer!"

"I was reading my tarot cards last night and they told me that today I'd overhear a suspicious conversation in the back of the Hardware and Biology Supplies store and then get sucked into a mystical portal where I will find out that I am destined to be the Keybearer, so I decided to come check it out! That is so totally weird!" the girl, named Tsuki Shuugyofu exclaimed, and glanced at Kain. "And you?"

"Well, I was innocently walking home from school when I overheard a suspicious conversation in the back of the Hardware and Biology Supplies store, and there seems to be a mystical portal appearing overhead that I assume will suck me up and then I find out I'm destined to be the Keybearer," Kain said, pointing up at aforementioned mystical portal.

"Wow. That's totally weird," Tsuki said.

All four of them were suddenly sucked into the portal.

Towards the end of the City of OC suburbs, there was a large suspicious mansion. Obviously, this meant that there were strange and probably unsavory goings-on occurring within. In fact, this suspicious mansion had been abandoned for many years until just recently, when a new strange and unsavory character took up residence inside its walls, overrun with ivy and tree roots tearing up the basement.

Strange and unsavory characters cannot operate on their own, however, and so this particular being had placed a sign out front on the rusting iron-wrought gates. "HELP WANTED- APPLY WITHIN", it read.

The gigantic hooded bouncer at the gates turned away anybody not dressed in a black coat—which, luckily for the strange and unsavory master of the house, was pretty much no one.

A line of black-clad applicants stretched all the way out of the mansion's front doors and wrapped around the garden twice, with the interior half of the line twisting up and down staircases and finally down into the basement room, where the master of the house sat in a tall-backed chair with a clipboard.

"Next," he said lamely, flipping a piece of very-well conditioned hair out of his face.

The black-coated being at the front of the line excitedly stepped forward. "Greetings. I heard you were recruiting?"

"Indeed, I am, honey," the master giggled slightly, and turned a page on his clipboard. "Name?"

"My name is Susiex!" the girl cackled as wickedly and forebodingly as she could, which was not very much so.

"... Susiex?" the master lifted an eyebrow curiously. "Okay then. Hair color?"

"I'm a natural blonde, sir," Susiex pulled off her hood to show that this was true—she'd even pulled it into pigtails for the occasion.

"Eye color?"

"Green."

"Mmhmm. Powers and weapons?"

"My power is psychic ability, and I carry a samurai sword," Susiex said proudly.

"Next," the master rolled his eyes and waved her away to be escorted out by one of the creepy, silent bouncers. "*Honestly*. Why do they always have a samurai sword? They are so cliché and icky-poo."

"I don't know, my Superior," the woman standing alongside his chair said, shaking her head.

"Whatever. Next. Please state your name."

"Jeff."

"No, I mean your *true* name," the master yawned. "Add an x, honey."

"Oh. Yes, um..." Jeff gave this a lot of thought for a moment, and finally nodded. "My name is Jeff...x."

"Jeffx," the master said lamely.

"Yes. Jeffx."

"Very well. Hair color?"

Jeffx removed his hood and ran a few fingers through his plain brown hair. "Auburn-bark...ish... sienna."

"Eye color?"

"Trillium steel," Jeffx seemed much more confident in that answer.

"All right. And your weapon and powers?"

"My powers are the powers of psychic ability," Jeffx said proudly. "And I wield a samurai sword."

"Hmm. Well, Jeff...x... you show some promise in your listing of your hair and eye colors, but other than that you seem *awfully* average to me, I'm sorry to say. Tell me, in one sentence, why I should allow you to be a part of my esteemed society," the master crossed his legs and smiled patronizingly, pulling out a stopwatch. "I will be timing your pauses... when I hear a period, I'm cutting you off."

Jeffx looked mildly panicked, then took a tremendous breath and said, all in one sentence, "When I was a child my parents were murdered by Heartless and their hearts were stolen and almost mine too except the Heartless spared me and delivered me to their master Xehanort AKA Xemnas who raised me and taught me all his powers except I was a human so one day I tripped in a puddle on the way home from school and my master Xemnas was so angry I got mud on the carpet he disowned me so I wandered out into the city where the Heartless ate my heart and now I'm a Nobody and I'm here to join your Organization."

"*Fantastic* interview," the master said, eyes all aglow with glee. "You're in, honey."

"YAY!" Jeffx pumped his fist excitedly.

"My assistant, Xuxastell will escort you to the initiation room. Do feel free to make yourself comfortable," the master smiled generously and gestured to the black-coated woman standing to his left.

Xuxastell grinned at Jeffx and motioned for him to follow her. He was taken by her ruthless nature, her hip-length blonde hair that flowed like an ocean of curls, her drop-dead good looks and her take-no-crap attitude. "So, uh... Xuxastell, was it?" Jeffx mumbled stupidly, staring at her with a loving glance. "That's a pretty name... you mixed it up real good in there."

"Why thank you," Xuxastell giggled airily, leading Jeffx through a dark corridor towards a locked room at the far end of the basement.

"Tell me, then... if we're to be partners in crime, my lovely black-coated beauty," Jeffx had been watching old romance movies lately—and Humphrey Bogart had nothing on him. "We ought to get to know each other. So, uh... what number are you?"

"I'm Number Twelve," Xuxastell grinned and opened the door, taking Jeffx by the arm and leading him innocently forward into the darkness.

I've been having... these weird thoughts lately.

Like... is any of this for real? ... or not?

Oh God, not *another* one with the Philosophy Stick up his ass. I've had it up to HERE with you kids and your bullshit videogame philosophy.

When Kain opened his eyes after an extended FMV sequence of himself falling through air no water no air no water no BOTH, he found himself standing on an ornate glass window depicting Snow White and her seven dwarves. He gazed up at the sky, and majestic white doves soared past his head, feathers falling all around him. He remained posed there, staring up at the light above him, when...

Okay kid, that's enough. You've had your turn. Time for somebody else to have their opening sequence, now knock it off!

Kain blinked suddenly and found himself suddenly on a much more populated corner of the creepy Tutorial Drug Trip World, in a long queue line with velvet ropes blocking him from going anywhere but forward. Up ahead was a large group of ordinary-looking teenagers not unlike himself, all waiting their turn to step through an ornate white door at the end of the line. Smooth jazz was playing from ethereal speakers.

"Where... where is this?" Kain stammered. "Where am I?"

"This is where we wait in line to become Keybearers, the creepy text from nowhere said," Turbo explained.

"There's sure a lot of people here," Tsuki tilted her head and bit her lip a bit. "I guess I was under the impression there was... um... only one Keybearer."

Yeah, you'd think so, wouldn't you? the creepy text said irritably. **But in this world, the Keybearers *apparently* reproduce like little bunnies.**

"Oh. I see," Kain shuffled awkwardly in place and glanced around. "So, uh... we just stand in this line and then we wake up back on our world as Keybearers?"

"Not quite. First we have to endure a long, anal-retentive tutorial of some sort," Raven counted on his fingers, going through the step-by-step process outlined in the brochure they were handing out at the front of the line, entitled "SO YOU WANT TO BE A KEYBEARER?" "Then there's another line, where we step up and fight some kind of gigantic Heartless monster. And then we wait in line for the portal back OUT, where we get our Keyblades."

"And then do we get relayed to Traverse Town?" Kain sounded excited.

"Well, ah... normally, but they've had so many Keybearers pass through Traverse Town they've actually started sending some of us to Twilight Town instead," Turbo shook his head. "And I hear the cap's getting pretty high around there too, so, um..."

we might just end up back in the City where we started from."

"But then how will we find a gummi ship and travel around the universe from world to world fighting evil? Isn't that what Keybearers do?" Kain asked.

Sorry, kid, one of the lesser-ranked random text guys said with a textually implied shrug. **We just set you up with the Keyblades. You're on your own finding a ride.**

"Oh. Oh well. I'll just go find Sora and hitch a ride with Donald and Goofy," Kain shrugged.

Yeah, you and every other one of these chumps, the text guy laughed. **Hey Bill, get this. This kid thinks he's gonna travel along with Sora, Donald and Goofy!**

Hahaha! Keep dreamin', buddy! Sora's only the hardest working little Keybearer of all you losers, Bill the Text Guy snickered. **He's had to bust his ass over and over again letting new little dorks like you tag along on his adventures. Poor sap's probably had to replay the same worlds and the same storyline maybe three hundred times now... and that's just this week.**

Kain frowned. "So you mean... he has to watch his best friend Riku turn evil and betray him over and over again? Like a hundred times a *day*?"

Riku? That poor sucker's *long* gone, Ted the Text Guy implicated sadness in his font. **He's too busy running from all the OC fangirls trying to jump his bones to even show up in the storyline anymore. We ain't seen him around here in... hm. It's been a while, hasn't it, Bill?**

At least a month or so, Ted.

Yeah. Don't even *start* with what that poor bastard's gone through. And all because you little twerps are too boring to come up with your own idea for a plot, so you just GOTTA tag along with *Soooraaa*.

"This is sure a lot more complicated than I thought it would be," Kain made a face. "I thought for sure I'd be out killing Heartless by now."

"Everything's changed..." Raven said solemnly, gazing up at the black sky above them. "Nothing's the same as it used to be... *A scattered memory that's like a far-off*
—"

HEY! A particularly bitchy Text Guy burst out, poking Raven angrily in the chest. **DID YOU READ THE GUIDELINES! One opening FMV sequence PER KEYBEARER! Knock that shit off!**

"Sorry," Raven quieted himself immediately, and wished he had a copy of National Geographic to read until it was his turn to play Keybearer.

With the chapter's prerequisite satirical points now firmly shoved down the reader's throats, the narration cut back to the characters we all care about—Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus as they made their way down the streets of the City of OC, following the beeping signal dot in the back of the world guidebook's computer scanner.

"Any clearer signal yet?" Lexaeus asked

"No. Not yet. But we're heading in the right direction," Vexen sighed irritably.

"I just wish we would stop having altercations with the locals," Xaldin shook his head. "It's getting exceptionally annoying."

As though some convenient hand of fate had been listening for the cue, a bright-eyed teenager in goofy pants and wielding a plastic Keyblade came flying out of the nearest alley, shrieking out a battle cry of "DAKTARIIII!" and tackling Xaldin to the ground. Rather, throwing himself pathetically at Xaldin, only to be caught by the collar and tossed into the nearest convenient open sewer with a minimal amount of stress or concern exerted by Xaldin himself.

Ignoring the screams and pleas for help, Xaldin brushed off his coat and rushed up to walk alongside his comrades again. "And just the slightest bit pathetic, as well," he added.

"Indeed," Lexaeus shoved a Keybearer attempting to stand in his way to the ground effortlessly, stepping over him without so much as batting an eye. "You think they'd learn."

"Of course they'll never learn," Vexen rolled his eyes, casting a slick sheet of ice on the sidewalk behind them and sending an entire swarm of Keybearers slipping and sliding out into heavy traffic. "They all want to fulfill their wishes of being the little 'star' of the show."

"Nothing wrong with wish-fulfillment, after all," Lexaeus nodded sagely, cracking the skulls of two oncoming Keybearers together and discarding their unconscious bodies off to the side.

Xaldin shook his head and threw a large group of the overzealous locals against the nearest brick wall in a blast of hurricane-force gusts. "If only they'd learn that the vast majority of those coming to Fandom Hearts do so to read about characters they know—their pale, trite, two-dimensional, unoriginal creations will never inspire such loyalty or fans, no matter how much they like to kid themselves."

"Let them live in their silly little world then," Vexen hissed and bashed a particularly rowdy Keybearer in the face with a vicious backhand. "But I can't stand it when they get all self-righteous and pissy when nobody cares about their precious little invocations."

"OHMIGOD YOU GUYS! IT'S THEM!"

The three Nobodies turned around uneasily to spot a gang of rowdy black-coated females screeching and running at them with the force of a mob of Beatlemania teenagers.

Sighing immensely, they turned around and within a matter of seconds had reduced the mob to lumps on the sidewalk in various degrees of severe injury.

"And you know what's really pathetic?" Xaldin quipped disgustedly. "When they don't even bother creating a new character and just port themselves into the story as the heroes."

"Ah, yes. 'I got sucked into the video game' fiction. How remarkably clever," Vexen said snidely.

"Yes. It's only been done ten million times in every possible section," Lexaeus chuckled, rolling his eyes.

They continued on their way down the street, not bothering to look back even as Xelz wriggled her way out of the ice flow, pulled Renaxec out of the trash can she'd landed in, and carefully unhooked the back of Mynx's coat from the overhead telephone wire.

"Gosh, that was awfully bitchy of them," Dixia shook the sleet and icicle shards out of her coat, frowning angrily. "What'd they go and do that for?"

"I don't know—we just wanted to get their autographs!" Lynx sniffled as she emerged from the spontaneous mudslide she'd been trapped in.

"You're a big fat hypocrite, you know that?" Gext examined the multiple stab wounds on her torso and glanced down, addressing the body crushed beneath the 20-ton boulder in the gutter.

"So sue me," Gexegee grunted, in a severe lot of pain.

"My lord, our latest experiments ought to be done by now," Xuxastell said softly as she opened the door to her master's chamber. "Perhaps we ought to- AAGH!"

"Xuxastell, can't you see I'm busy?" her master hissed furiously, throwing his sparkling diamond tennis bracelet to the ground. "Do you remember the rule we discussed when I created you? About the scrunchie on the door?"

"... 'If there's a scrunchie on the door, **x-x-Marley-donoCrImSoNfLoWeR-x-x** is busy playing dress up,'" Xuxastell recited, no easy task thanks to the spastic formatting of his name. She winced and turned slightly away to spare herself the sight of her master in a long, luxurious red evening gown and fully covered with radiant Maybelline products that he certainly wasn't born with.

"That's RIGHT, honey!" Marluxia's Seme snapped, glaring at his icky female assistant and brushing bright pink flowing man-hair out of his face to show her just how pissy she'd made him. "Look, the stress has reduced my hair to a frizzy mess! AGH! I can never properly menace the world like this!"

"I-I'm sure the Grand Master Fangirl will forgive you if your hair is only slightly off, Superior," Xuxastell covered her eyes and felt vaguely queasy. "In any case, Superior, the line of applicants now wraps around the mansion four times. Also, Jeffx has been properly... recruited."

"Oh HAS he!" Marley-dono squealed excitedly. "Excellent! Forget the other applicants for now, I want to see how my new little honey turned out!" he clapped his hands joyously and gestured grandly towards the door. "Come, Xuxastell! TO THE EXPERIMENT CHAMBER!"

It was difficult taking the disturbing Marley-dono seriously as he skipped down the hallway of the creepy abandoned mansion, taking his time to scope out the asses of every mutant plant Gutless-turned pre-nubile skinny servant boy and stopping

every so often to lavish attention on the huge pictures of himself he'd hung all over, but at last they reached the darkened basement chamber where they'd left Jeffx several hours earlier.

"HONEEEEYYYYYYY! **x-x-Marley-donoCrImSoNfLoWeR-x-x**'s here to check up on yooooooooou!" Marley-dono cried out, throwing open the door of the transformation pod. Smoke poured out from within and a dark silhouette was barely visible through all the wires and unpleasant-looking needles and plugs. Suddenly two glowing red eyes opened, and Jeffx was heard to give a low moan.

"The machine is suitable for both uses, it seems," Xuxastell smiled evilly.

"Yes, ooh, I love the looks of him already! And I thought it really outdid itself pulling that little number on *you*, honey," Marley-dono cackled, unfastening the straps around Jeffx. "Honey, are you awake?"

"I am awake and ready to do your bidding, Master," Jeffx's voice no longer sounded pre-pubescent—no, this tone was better described as pre-apocalyptic.

"Glad to hear it. Come on out, honey, I can't *wait* to take your for a test drive," Marley-dono cooed.

Jeffx stepped out of the frightening pod machine and for the first time, Marley-dono and Xuxastell got a full glimpse of his new outfit. His auburn barkish sienna hair was now auburn barkish sienna-silver, and extended far down below his knees. His outfit was entirely comprised of leather and death midnight raven black feathers, matching those on his new set of wings—wing, rather, as one wing was angel-style and covered in the same raven feathers, and the other was horned and demonic. His blood gore sanguine red eyes glinted in the dim light of the laboratory and his clawed hands tightened around the samurai sword at his belt. Most prominent however was the Gutless tattoo on his lower abdomen.

"Jeffx, you look FANTASTIC!" Marley-dono squealed. "My plan is working out better than I ever thought it would! MPMH! Can you imagine an entire army of these things, Xuxastell?"

"We've made a definite improvement over Sakura-Rose, that's for certain," Xuxastell laughed wickedly. "A few more proper recruitments like this and we'll have an entire army of Mary Sue Gutless! This world will fall into our grasp and the Grand Master Fangirl will be most pleased!"

"Perhaps," Marley-dono giggled, curling a long strand of Jeffx's hair around his

finger. "They'll even be able to take care of those nuisances Xiggy-kun warned us about before his unfortunate demise."

"The Nobodies?" Xuxastell rolled her eyes. "Oh honestly—look at the guy. He'll make mincemeat out of them... and if he doesn't, *I* will."

"That's right... all the Mary Sues in the world couldn't hope to match you in terms of ability, honey," Marley-dono sneered cruelly. "But luckily, I don't think we'll have to worry about things getting that far... will we, Jeffx?"

"I have changed my name," Jeffx announced. "It is now..."

A shrill beeping noise from one of the computer monitors distracted the three of them from hearing Jeffx's new moniker. Marley-dono rushed over to see what the problem was, and made a horrified face. "Oh POOPY!"

"What is it, Master?" Jeffx glowered.

"I'm picking up the signals of three Nobodies on the grounds of my beautiful evil mansion!" Marley-dono hissed, stamping his feet in a tantrum. "It's those horrible ugly Organization XIII yutzes! They've come here to destroy our plan!"

"I will never allow it!" Xuxastell shrieked, tightening her fist in fury. "Quickly, Master! Order the applicants waiting outside to dispose of them!"

"It's too late for that," Marley-dono wrinkled his nose and twisted his finger in his hair nervously. "They've already begun attacking..."

Xuxastell and Jeffx crowded over Marley-dono's shoulders and watched the monitor themselves, hoping to get a good view of the situation. "But this can't be right, Master..." Jeffx grumbled. "The applicants are all getting their asses handed to them."

"Ooh—I didn't think they were supposed to bend that way," Xuxastell winced.

"No... no I don't think they are," Marley-dono looked vexed, clenching his fists. "Agh! And they're throwing their unconscious bodies into my beautiful rosebushes! THOSE WERE RAISED BY HAND, YOU BASTARDS!"

"What shall we do, Master?" Jeffx growled. "We will not stand for those Nobodies to make such fools of us!"

"They've kicked the asses of every single one of them and thrown them over the hedges, and now that giant brute is erecting a stone wall around the premises to keep them from coming back in!" Xuxastell pointed out. "Master, send out Jeffx and I! We will take care of them while you think of some way to keep the mansion and our precious machine secure—pathetic Organization wannabes are a dime a dozen, but we can't afford to lose the machine!"

"Right you are, sister," Marley-dono clapped his hands. "Very well! We'll do JUST THAT! Xuxastell, Jeffx! Go outside and give those jerks the what-for!"

"Yes, Master," they both nodded and vanished into dark portals.

"Those poopy-heads have another thing coming if they think they'll defeat me so easily!" Marley-dono slammed a fist into the computer monitor, before pausing, glancing at his hand, and utterly freaking out. "OHMIGAWD! I BROKE A NAIL!"

"Ah. Two more to add to the stack?" Xaldin asked, amusement apparent in his voice as Xuxastell and Jeffx appeared before them.

"You people never learn," Vexen smiled with amusement. "Do humor us. Who are you supposed to be?"

"The one on the left's obviously a Mary Sue Gutless," Xaldin pointed to Jeffx, smiling patronizingly. "Go on. Give us your fancy speech, boy."

"Boy?" Jeffx sneered. "You dare to call me boy! I am the son of seraph and demon and also human! I am the cold assassin, I appear from the shadows of darkness and strike out of nowhere—my victims do not even see me coming before my blade claims them in the name of the dark! My power is unimaginable by any human imagination! There is no one stronger, no one faster, no one possibly more badass than I am! I am the ultimate! I am the strongest! I am the fastest! I am the most badass! I am the ultimate—"

His speech went on for quite a while. For space's sake, we shall present the abbreviated version.

"—I am the ultimate opponent! Prepare to bow before me, you pathetic whelps, for I am the terror that flaps in the night! I... am... **JEFFIROTH**!" Jeffx-turned-Jeffiroth screamed dramatically.

"JEFFIROTH!" echoed the trained opera choir in the background.

"Isn't that precious, gentlemen?" Vexen smiled cruelly. "How he thinks we ought to be afraid of him. It's too bad we've discovered an immunity to his kind, so his empty threats are nothing more than just that."

"Ah, and look at this. The one on the left's obviously an Organization member," Xaldin said, mocking how impressed he would have been had he no dignity whatsoever. "How cute. Tell me, dear, what's your name?"

"My name is Xuxastell, *sir*," Xuxastell snapped evilly, pulling an electrified mage's staff with all sorts of points and sharp edges on it out of nowhere. "And you're making a huge mistake underestimating me. I am a member of Organization XIII!"

"Are you?" Vexen rolled his eyes. "Well, let's see now... XIII—thirteen members, right? Let's count them up, shall we? There's Xemnas and Xigbar..."

"Then the three of us," Xaldin added. "Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus... Then Zexion, Saïx and Axel..."

"And we mustn't forget Demyx, Luxord, Marluxia, Larxene and Roxas. Hm. That's thirteen," Vexen challenged her. "What number would you be?"

"Oh *hell*. She's Number Twelve," Lexaeus said suddenly, staring in horror at the computer in the back of the world guidebook.

"What do you mean, she's number twelve?" Vexen snapped.

"I mean, the Nobody signal we were following before?" Lexaeus said sternly, and showed Vexen the blinking signal on the monitor. "It belongs to *her*. She's Number Twelve."

"That's not possible," Xaldin's voice rose ever-so-slightly with alarm. "Larxene is Number Twelve."

"She *was*," Lexaeus's eyes narrowed. "That thing there... whatever it is, it used to be Larxene. She's transformed into this new being... and she is Number Twelve."

Xuxastell cackled wickedly, spinning the staff around in her hands and striking a seductive pose. "That's right... it's ever so wonderful to see you again, my comrades!"

There was a long, awkward pause on both sides of the battle.

"Well shit," Xaldin said succinctly. His sideburns seemed to agree.

(Word out to my Org VI homies. Peace out, West-Midwestish-East Coast for life, y'all.)

Anything But Ordinary

Chapter Five: Anything But Ordinary

The unofficial official motto of Organization XIII, much like the Scouts, was "Be Prepared". A lot of strange things happened in the places between darkness and light, and Xemnas instructed every one of his followers to be ready for absolutely anything.

As such, it was difficult to startle an Organization member for any reason. All thirteen of them carried themselves as though they expected a chainsaw-wielding serial killer to leap out from behind every corner, giant meteors to crash down upon them from every direction, and the world itself to implode in a giant fireball at any second. Their reflexes were insanely fast, they were quick on the uptake, and could salvage their way out of sticky situations faster than MacGuyver in a Wal-Mart. You could spring any number of insane obstacles in their paths, only to be met with a shrug, an "Oh well", and then the severe beating of your ass.

This explains the rather unusually calm reactions Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus exhibited upon finding out that the missing Number Twelve of their Organization, Larxene, had just turned up in a horrifying backwater world in Fandom Hearts, except she wasn't exactly herself and seemed to have been turned into some kind of obnoxious original character with big poofy hair and a nastier disposition than before. If you can fathom such a thing.

"So let me get this straight," Lexaeus said under his breath to his two compatriots. "That's Larxene."

"But it's not," Vexen shook his head. "In this world, Larxene has been replaced by one of the godforsaken locals."

"So it's *not* Larxene," Lexaeus corrected himself.

"No, um... as far as this world is concerned, Larxene never existed. Rather... she never existed, sort to speak, but here she never didn't exist. Er..." Vexen stumbled for a proper way to explain his theory.

"That woman is taking Larxene's place," Xaldin cut in.

"So it *is* Larxene?" Lexaeus raised an eyebrow.

"It *was* Larxene. At some point. I think," Vexen hated to admit it, but this was the strangest thing he'd ever had to deal with—and that included the time Marluxia was cleaning out his dead herb garden and accidentally dumped the runoff into the castle's water supply, causing half the Organization to zone into psychedelic hallucinations for a week ("Luxord in the Sky with Diamonds"). "I don't *know*. Should we just ask?"

"We probably ought to, rather than kill her right out only to learn that it *is* Larxene," Xaldin sighed heavily.

"If you boys are done over there, I've got some ass-kicking for you!" Xuxastell yelled shrilly.

"Pardon me, Madam," Lexaeus spoke up. "Before we proceed into the savagery, I was wondering if we might discuss your origins, in a friendly manner. Just one Nobody to another."

"Do you think I'm hot?" Xuxastell giggled insanely and struck what she must have thought was a seductive pose.

"I don't see how that's relevant," Lexaeus replied lamely.

"What the hell *are* you?" Vexen was in much less of a mood for Xuxastell's creepy mind games.

"You idiots, I've already told you!" Xuxastell huffed, holding her mage's staff menacingly. "I'm Xuxastell! I'm the Number Twelve of Organization XIII!"

"Larxene is Number Twelve, you pathetic wannabe," Xaldin snarled.

"Hah! Maybe she *was*," Xuxastell grinned wickedly, holding up her black gloved hands in a dramatic fashion and staring at them. "But that hateful woman doesn't exist anymore. My brilliant master captured her and erased her from the face of existence!"

"Non-existence," Lexaeus corrected.

"Oh. Right. NON-existence!" Xuxastell cackled. "When your castle came under attack by my master's Gutless brethren, she was immune to the parasite, having no... you know! She escaped in a gummi ship and tried to cross over the barrier of

Fandom Hearts to stop us, but my charming and wonderful master captured her and used his beautiful machine on her!"

"A machine? Of what sort?" Vexen had flipped open his notebook to write all the exposition down.

"It's a *magnificent* machine that transforms people into badass, awesome and obnoxiously flawless creatures. **x-x-Marley-donoCrImSoNfLoWeR-x-x** has been employing it for some time attempting to create the perfect Gutless and as you can see, he's getting closer and closer," Xuxastell sneered and motioned to Jeffiroth, who was standing off to the side striking a maniacal pose and spouting off more dramatic monologues. His choir stood off in the bushes to the left, taking a water break.

"So Marluxia's Seme is behind those horrific Mary Sue Gutless," Lexaeus's eyes narrowed and he seemed to be bracing himself for the impending fight. "I suppose you're one of his creations too? The next step up?"

"Oh please," Xuxastell cackled, gesturing at her one-winged... wait, no, two-one-winged companion. "Maybe you don't *understand*. I'm not a third-rate joke of a character like this loser."

"Jeffiroth is not a loser!" Jeffiroth interjected furiously.

"Jeffiroth!" his choir echoed.

"Right, right- whatever," Xuxastell waved him off. "I'm not an original character. In this world? I am canon, baby. That bitch Larxene and I are not the same person—she has been blinked out of existence and my beloved master put me in her place!"

"But *why*?" Xaldin asked incredulously. "You people don't bother replacing the other members of our Organization you don't like—you just maim their personalities beyond recognition or ignore them completely to fit your needs. Why go to all that trouble replacing her when you could just find some other way to bend her to your will?"

"Xaldin, it's *Larxene* we're talking about," Vexen reminded him in a weary, weary voice that spoke of many, many failed attempts to bend Larxene to his will. And not like *that* either.

"... Mmm, good point."

"Nevertheless," Lexaeus still had his fierce gaze locked on the imposter Nobody as he pulled his tomahawk up out of the ground. "Larxene is our comrade-in-arms and we will not stand for what you have done to her. In the name of the *real* Organization XIII—prepare to die."

"I think not," Xuxastell cackled and twirled her mage staff around her, stirring up a shower of lightning and a rumble of thunder beneath her feet. "I have come too close to achieving my dream to let you fools stop me now!"

"What dream?" Vexen asked, summoning up his shield.

"Why, the dream I have held since the moment I was first born into this world as a Nobody!" Xuxastell sighed, posing dramatically and staring at the sky again. She clasped her hands together over what would have been her heart, and looking closely one might have noticed sparkles emanating from her body.

"Do tell us. I'm morbidly curious," Xaldin encouraged her, calling down three of his lances.

Xuxastell brushed flowing strands of cornsilk blonde hair out of her face, battered her grape purple eyes, pursed cherry-red lips and lifted a milk white hand to her licorice black leather coat. "I will finally get to be with *him*," she sighed, a veritable produce aisle of affectionate daydreaming.

"I hate to say it, but Marluxia isn't interested in you unless you're a flower or under sixteen," Vexen interrupted snidely.

"Vexen, that is no way to discuss one of our colleagues," Lexaeus said, glaring at him with disapproval.

"Ew! No, not Marluxia!" Xuxastell looked appalled at the very thought. "I don't sleep with anything girlier than me!"

"Nobody girlier than her? That narrows it down," Xaldin laughed suddenly, as he and the other two simultaneously took a huge step back away from the imposter.

"And not you three!" Xuxastell groaned in disgust.

There was a cough from the other side of the courtyard. "Oh... Jeffiroth is flattered, Number Twelve, but Jeffiroth is dedicated to exerting his non-specific revenge on a non-specific number of innocent humans," Jeffiroth cut in. "And Jeffiroth does not want to become the victim of a large, crazed group of internet

nerds who like to draw him pregnant and female. He's going to stay niiiiice and single and very, very asexual."

"Jeffiroth!" sang the choir.

"Why are you speaking in the third person all of a sudden?" Lexaeus stared in bemused wonderment at the Gutless.

The frustrated Xuxastell screamed in rage and clenched her fists. "Noooo, you idiots! Axel! I'm talking about AXEL!"

There was a brief pause before Xaldin laughed. "Oh dear."

"What is it?" Lexaeus was still trying to figure out the mystery of Jeffiroth's syntax.

"Her name," Xaldin had come to be very good at anagrams in all his time as a member of the Organization. "Take out an x. It spells 'Axel Slut'."

"'Axel Lust', thank you very much," Xuxastell corrected them haughtily. "But yes! That's right. Now that I am a member of Organization XIII, I will finally have a chance to win the love of my precious red-headed emerald-orbed snarky angel of black-coated hotness... my Flurry of Dancing Flames... my Number Eight, my Axel!"

"A noble pursuit if ever there was one," Jeffiroth commented with a nod of approval.

"So let me get this straight," Xaldin cleared his throat after a thoughtful moment of silence. "You have destroyed a member of Organization XIII to allow yourself into this world. You are transforming innocent locals into pale, idiotic and annoying shades of their former selves. You are 'betraying' your 'fellow' Organization members by assisting the group trying to sabotage them and bring about their downfall. And you're doing it all because you're in love with Number Eight."

Xuxastell sighed dreamily, batting her eyelashes. "Marley-dono promised! He said we'll fall in love and get married and have beautiful little Nobody babies! If I prove myself strong enough, there's no way Axel will continue to ignore me and fail to acknowledge my existence!"

"Non-existence," corrected Lexaeus.

"Oh, yes. Non-existence," she recovered. "In any case! You fools don't understand my course of action! I may be betraying the Organization, but it's only a matter of

time until I finally win my place in Axel's—"

Vexen had been oddly silent for the last few moments, but it appeared he would not remain so for long. There was sweat beading on his brow, his eyes were as narrow as they could possibly get, his fists were clenched and he was gritting his teeth as though holding back a violent explosion of curses and angry words. He interrupted Xuxastell with a small grunt, only a warning of the fury that was to come.

"Vexen," Lexaeus turned to him suddenly, recognizing the look on his face. "Calm down."

"I *am* calm," Vexen's lip twitched with seething, furious hatred.

"It's not worth getting worked up over, Vexen," Xaldin added. "She's a silly fool and she's been depressingly misinformed. Don't let it bother you."

"Don't let it bother me?" Vexen hissed, turning to glare at his companions. "'*Don't let it bother me*'? Have you taken a moment to think—a moment to even vaguely *consider* exactly *what* it is this *imbecile* is prattling on about?"

"Vexen," Lexaeus said again, tone rising. "Don't lose your temper."

"Madame," Vexen snapped suddenly at Xuxastell, pointing at her. "Look at me. *Look at me*. Look me in the eyes, this instant."

"What?" Xuxastell crossed her arms and complied. "You got a bone to pick with me?"

"Look me in the eyes. Are you looking? Do we have eye contact? Can you see the expression on my face?" Vexen lowered his shield and gestured to his eyes. "You can? Good. Now, let's see... where to begin- oh yes..."

Xuxastell's eyes bugged out of her head as Vexen exploded into a vicious tirade, the tirade of a scientist whose entire life's and unlife's work was being disregarded in the name of creepy wish-fulfillment. "WE. DON'T. HAVE. HEARTS! *We do not have hearts!* There is but one rule in the Nobody codebook regarding the definition of a Nobody, and that rule is—**NOBODIES. DO NOT. HAVE. HEARTS!** You are not capable of falling in love with Axel, nor is he capable of falling in love with you, because falling in love is an *emotion*, and emotions are born in the *heart*, and as I have underlined numerous times—WE DO NOT HAVE HEARTS!"

"But he makes me feel like I h-" Xuxastell began to stammer, eyes wide and voice tiny.

"DON'T YOU GIVE ME THAT SHIT!" Vexen screeched. "The operative term there is 'like!' Feel 'like' you have a heart—but you DON'T. Because you are a NOBODY. And NOBODIES. DO NOT. HAVE. HEARTS! Any emotions you may think you are detecting are in an intellectual sense only— I am currently not furious out of my mind with your utter disregard for any sort of logic besides your own desperate little delusions—I understand that *had* I a heart, and were I therefore *capable* of feeling emotions, I would be completely enraged at your stupidity! Therefore, I *behave* as though I am enraged and about to choke the life out of you, in order to mask the fact that I am a Nobody. You do not seem to understand this fact, making your pathetic rantings and ravings and moronic behaviors *absolutely* inexcusable. And *furthermore!*"

"I hate it when he gets like this," Lexaeus sighed from nearby.

"It can't be worse than the time somebody suggested that Reno was Axel's Other," Xaldin reminded him.

"Oh yes... he was beside himself. It took a week to get Demyx down off the ceiling," Lexaeus recalled with a sigh.

"Furthermore!" Vexen wasn't done yet, so 'furious' that he was beginning to glow with an icy aura, "Nobodies are not born by traditional means—they are created, and therefore *it isnot possible* for a Nobody to 'have babies', you thickheaded dolt."

It is usually at this point in the story that some wonderfully smug reader decides to open up his or her email client and begin a long, profanity-laced letter to the author with a long bulleted list of every single little piece of the science of Nobodies that she got wrong and the reader's own theories on the game, including helpful citations to points in the game script that discussed such things. There are also usually lines like "if you would bother to pay attention at the part where..." and "I have played the game nine times and I can tell you that..."

So it is at this point the author would like to ask that the readers accept a few liberties she may have taken, and should they feel like popping off a pretentious email to prove her wrong, she suggests that they take a deep breath and remind themselves that they are about to get up in arms and pissy about science in a video game.

The narrative break conveniently skipped over Vexen's very own profanity-laced

tirade on the science of Nobodies and returns us to the part where Xuxastell, shamed and enraged at the severe thrashing her dreams had just received, took a few steps back away from our heroes and glared at them. "Enough!" she screamed. "No more talk—it's time for the three of you to suffer the same fate as your comrades! We will take your... you know and your Semes will be helpless to disobey the Grand Master Fangirl's command!"

"I assure you, Madame, watching your attempt will be most entertaining," Xaldin said smugly.

"Or perhaps..." Xuxastell smiled, "Perhaps instead I will capture you and present you to my master Marley-dono as a trio of new experiments... You too could come into this world replaced by new existences, ones that would not be so adamantly against our plans!"

"We're going to kill you now," Vexen was still red-faced and quite in the mood for some ass-kicking.

"Your attempt will be most entertaining," Xuxastell mocked Xaldin's voice and extended a graceful hand to point at them. "Jeffiroth! Deal with these three!"

"Yes, Number Twelve!" Jeffiroth cackled maniacally and drew out a seven-foot-long samurai katana, black feathers and sparkles flying through the air around him and eyes glowing the same red shade of sanguine, and also blood.

"Jeffiroth!" sang the choir.

"I'm heading back inside to check on our master!" Xuxastell huffed and raised a portal of darkness to step into.

"After all that drama, you're not even going to fight us yourself?" Lexaeus asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I wouldn't dirty my hands on the likes of you," Xuxastell sneered and stepped through the portal.

Once back inside the mansion, "Number Twelve" let out a horrified girlish screech and burst into tears.

Lightning and thunder filled the halls and exploded around her as Xuxastell ran

towards the master chamber with her face buried in her hands, plowing over hoards of inattentive guards on the way. Her not-exactly-a-heart ached with the pain of Vexen's cruel words and she was creating a rainstorm of tears as she headed for a word with Marley-dono.

She skidded to a halt outside the master chamber and ignoring the polka dot girdle tied up to the doorknob, banged on the door with a fist and sobbed, "Master! Master Marley-dono, I-I must speak with you! Have you secured the machine?" She turned the doorknob and stepped inside. "A-are you in, Mast- AAGH!"

"Rub those back legs... Oh yes, you're a dirty little honeybee... Ah! Xuxastell, can't you see I'm busy?" Marley-dono hissed furiously, throwing his pink remote control to the ground. "Do you remember the rule we discussed when I created you? About the girdle on the door?"

"But Superior, I thought it was a scrunchie!" Xuxastell gaped in horror and covered her eyes, now crying for a very different reason.

"When there's a scrunchie on the door, **x-x-Marley-donoCrImSoNfLoWeR-x-x** is busy playing dress up! But when there's a girdle on the door, **x-x-Marley-donoCrImSoNfLoWeR-x-x** is busy watching his *special* videos!" Marley-dono huffed, glaring at her to show his icky female assistant just how pissy she'd made him.

"I'm sorry sir! It won't happen again!" Xuxastell sobbed and turned away from the big screen TV, showing a video of what appeared to be a very close up view of a bee pollinating a flower.

"Yes, well, make sure that it doesn't!" Marley-dono zipped up his frilly pink coat and shut off the TV. "Have you finished dealing with those fools outside yet?"

"N-not yet sir, I have Jeffiroth taking care of them as we speak," Xuxastell whimpered, wiping her eyes.

"I thought I told you to do it!" Marley-dono groaned. "Seriously, Xuxastell, can't you ever follow orders? What am I going to do with you?"

"W-well sir, I did! I mean... I was going to fight them, b-but one of them..." she blubbered, bursting into tears all over again. "H-he said that Axel could never love me because we don't have hearts!"

Marley-dono cocked his head slightly. "Oh, he did? Huh."

"W-well, is it true?" she sobbed. "I-is it true that my dream will never be realized? That Axel and I can never be together? That we can't have a bunch of cute little Nobody babies and name them Tomx and Bobx and Jenniferx and Charlenex?"

"Weeeeeell," Marley-dono twisted a finger around in his pink hair and grinned sheepishly. "Maaaaybe."

"Then you lied to me!" Xuxastell gasped in melodramatic horror. "You said if I helped you you'd... you'd make it so Axel and I could be together!"

"I'm *working* on it, honey," Marley-dono groaned and tossed his head, waving her off with a flick of the wrist. "You've already seen what I can do when given the proper materials. I'm sure with a little work I can make it possible... sorta."

"Sorta'?" Xuxastell looked shocked.

"You don't have a heaaart, honey," Marley-dono reminded her cheerfully. "It kinda comes with the territory. BU-U-U-UT! No whining about it *now*! We've got to deal with those hot, sexy little Organization miscreants before they ruin our entire operation... hmm... Do you think that big brawny one would look cute in a pair of these?" he asked, holding up a catalog of men's lingerie. "I like these little red ones, they'd really bring out the color of his hair..."

"You..."

"As for that hot little braidy-boy, mm... he's just got the prettiest blue eyes, doesn't he? I'm thinking green for him... it'd really help if we did something with all that lovely hair too..."

"You don't even care!"

Marley-dono turned from his catalog to see Xuxastell on the verge of an emotional breakdown in the doorway. "Hm?"

"I'll never be able to make my dream come true! A-and you promised you'd help me!" Xuxastell sobbed. "And you lied to me! And you don't even care! How *could* you? How could you do this to MEEEEEEHEEHEEHEEEEEEE?"

In an explosion of falsetto, trilling sobs, she turned on her heels and sped down the hall in the opposite direction, screeching and wailing and setting off miniature lightning storms and generally creating quite a tantrum.

"Gawd. What a crybaby," Marley-dono said distastefully, turning back to his catalog. Not that he could really blame her, on second thought, because that Axel had such a tight, cute little ass.

No matter. Once Jeffiroth brought him the three defeated Nobodies, then the fun could *really* begin.

The question was, did Vexen look better in blue or in leopard-print?

Back out in the garden, Jeffiroth was engaged in a fierce battle with all three of the Nobodies and doing quite well at holding his own, despite the unbelievable disadvantage he was in.

Unfortunately, a seven-foot katana, while cool-looking and certainly intimidating, is just not all that practical for a battle. Jeffiroth was able to attack with it, mostly by spinning around in a circle with his arms stretched out and hoping it would nick Xaldin, Vexen or Lexaeus enough to make them give up their unceasing barrage of wind, ice, earth and stabby-type attacks. His two-one wings flapped in the air behind him, his hair rustled majestically in the breeze and his choir was doing an admirable job of keeping up with the battle and changing the pace of the song accordingly.

"You three ought to be trembling at my power! Trembling, do you hear?" Jeffiroth yelled viciously, taking a break from his onslaught. "Greater men than the likes of you have trembled at my power—you will tremble, or you will die!"

Lexaeus hefted his tomahawk over his shoulder to take a breather, stepping out of Jeffiroth's immense reach. "Unfortunately, young man, we have taken precautions to avoid trembling at your pathetic 'power'."

"There are none who can avoid trembling at my power! None! No man alive! Not one! No man alive can avoid trembling at my power!" Jeffiroth cried redundantly, holding his sword straight up above him in a dramatic fashion. "I am the black wind that echoes in the—"

"There he goes again," Xaldin sighed heavily and recalled his lances.

Lexaeus groaned. "I would be much more mildly impressed with his fighting abilities if he would stop taking breaks to spew out poetry."

"—the spider that hangs down at your neck! They created me for one purpose, the sole purpose of—"

"Perhaps you could introduce another huge ironic boulder, Lexaeus?" Vexen suggested, letting his shield hang down at his side. "It worked so well last time."

"—blood, blood, bloody bodies as far as the eye could see! Every inch of the battlefield covered in corpses as they had known the fury of Jeffiroth and it littered their fields with bodies—"

"I don't know," Lexaeus sighed. "It takes a lot of energy to summon such a thing so quickly... and this one seems to be much stronger than the monstrosity we ran into earlier."

"—the gaping maw of the black beast of death, clutching its claws into your liver and ripping and holding and licking at the blood, feeding the hatred—"

Xaldin took a moment of pause to consider their options, keeping his eyes on the beautiful flowing veil of silver silk that was Jeffiroth's hair. "Hm."

"Are you listening to me?" Jeffiroth demanded, stopping right in the middle of his favorite sonnet about death and blood and sanguine, too, only to see that his intended victims appeared to be discussing something calmly amongst themselves. "You DARE to downplay the fury of Jeffiroth's mighty poetry! You dare to turn your heads away from him as he reaches his most glorious majesty? You dare to—"

"Get on with it!" our three heroes yelled simultaneously.

And much to their half-relief, half-chagrin, Jeffiroth seemed like he really was finally getting on with it. A dark glow surrounded him, his eyes intensified their blood red and also sanguine color, and he began to float a few feet off the ground.

"Very well then! Jeffiroth is leveling into his second form!" Jeffiroth screamed.

The choir would have sung out their usual echo, but they were busy moving around in the bushes to make room for a 100-piece symphonic orchestra and Nobuo Uematsu, skydiving out of a nearby helicopter to conduct the One-Two-Winged Angel Jeffiroth Second Level Angel's Teardrop Blood and Also Sanguine Sanctimony Suite Mark Three.

Jeffiroth, in the meantime, cloaked his entire body in waves of black magic that ebbed and flowed over every inch of him, throwing off an unearthly black glow that

would slowly transform him into Jeffiroth's Second Form. It was a mesmerizing and complicated process that would take six months alone for the programmers to animate in full FMV mode.

"Oh hell. Not a second form. This could be very difficult," Lexaeus said in a voice that suggested he didn't really believe so.

"Yes... I am inclined to believe he's all talk," Vexen said.

"Indeed," Xaldin had settled down on a convenient park bench to watch the four-hour animation sequence to depict Jeffiroth's leveling up. "I have a rather good idea as to how to get rid of this nuisance for good."

"Do tell," Vexen settled down next to him and Lexaeus joined them a moment later, having fetched three refreshing fruit smoothies from a nearby concession stand for the long, long wait.

Dear Diary,

You took my heart

Deceived me right from the start

You showed me dreams

I wish they'd turn into real

You broke a promise and made me realize

It was all just a lie...

Xuxastell lifted the pen from the paper and regarded her poem with a discerning eye, quite proud of the misery she had evoked in it until she realized that it was actually the chorus of the song "Angels" by Within Temptation, currently playing on loop on her iPod.

"Damn!" she stood up and threw her diary against the wall in fury, followed shortly by her iPod before she realized what she was doing.

It only took a few seconds of staring at the broken audio components on the floor

for Xuxastell to decide on her course of action.

Her and Axel could never truly be. She'd been deceived by a very, very flaming shell of a Nobody, and he'd manipulated her into doing terrible things and betraying her own Organization. She was incapable of writing her own poetry and her \$400 iPod lay shattered in pieces on the ground.

Xuxastell could not go on like this.

She rose wearily and stumbled dramatically down the hallway, eyes blankly staring straight ahead and her blonde curls falling wispy into her face. Tears left stains on her cheeks as she made her way to the grand staircase and headed down, down, down into the basement room where her cursed master, that fruity bastard Marley-dono had brought her into existence...

And it wasn't even her *own* existence!

It wasn't even *EXISTENCE*!

What kind of cruel world was it where a girl as beautiful and powerful as Xuxastell could be taken advantage of by a wicked... whatever he was such as Marley-dono? In what kind of cruel world could she be denied the one thing she wanted, oh, so desperately, more than anything else in the world?

Thoughts of Axel danced in her head as Xuxastell threw open the door to the basement room in which rested the transformation pod. She remembered miserably the first time she'd woken up here... the pod door opening, Marley-dono standing above her and welcoming her into his new world, her absolute disbelief that a guy could be that swishy and not actually be a woman...

It must have been ten minutes she sat there staring at the pod and utterly feeling sorry for herself. Her attention was only broken when she glanced at the security monitor off to the right, where Jeffiroth could be seen in the throes of his twenty-minute leveling up animation.

One of the cameras barely included the silhouettes of the three Organization members. Xuxastell sighed wistfully, drowning in self-pity and loathing after her heartless betrayal.

Heartless.

Oh dear god, the ANGST! It was too much!

"I must only upgrade," Xuxastell muttered to herself, lunging towards the pod and punching in new coordinates on the control panel. "I must upgrade... I-I will become the first Nobody with a heart! Yes! I will give myself a heart, a heart that cannot be broken like this un-heart..."

She took a moment to ponder the logic there. Then she shook it off and went back to her work.

"I'll show them... I can have a heart... I will fall in love! I *will* fall in love!" Xuxastell reached for the big red lever that Marley-dono had told her never, ever, ever to touch. It was certainly the lever that would install a heart into her next incarnation. She would not be born an ordinary Nobody again!

The door to the pod slid open and Xuxastell carefully backed in, strapping her arms and legs down accordingly and leaning her head back to take a deep breath.

"In your FACE, Marley-dono!" she screamed. "I will break free of your lies! You're so self-satisfied I don't need-"

Well, damn. That was "I Want To Break Free" by Queen.

"I *will* learn to write my own poetry!" Xuxastell vowed triumphantly as the door to the pod slid closed and sealed shut.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the mansion, Marley-dono was about to return calmly to his special movie time when he received a rather angry message via satellite TV link from somebody on a far-off world who obviously scared him very, very much.

"I KNEW I SHOULDN'T HAVE LEFT THIS OPERATION UP TO YOU, YOU PINK-HAIRED PUTZ! THANKS TO YOU, OUR PROJECT MARY SUE IS BACKED UP UNTIL WE CAN REPLACE THE HOARDS OF APPLICANTS THAT THOSE THREE JERKS LEVELED!"

"I-I'm sorry, Miss Grand Master Fangirl!" Marley-dono sobbed, twisting his hair around his fingers nervously. "It's true there have been a few setbacks but please, give me another chance!

"THE QUESTION IS WHETHER I FEEL YOU REALLY DESERVE ANOTHER CHANCE, MARLEY-DONO! I'VE WASTED FAR TOO MUCH OF MY TIME AND MY RESOURCES TRYING TO COVER UP YOUR NUMEROUS MISTAKES!"

"Aww, honey, you don't meant that! Of course I deserve another chance!" Marley-dono looked scandalized. "Look at what I made! Look at Jeffiroth! He's a great example of what Project Mary Sue could bring to our ranks! *Please* give me another try?"

"RIDDLE ME THIS, THEN: YOU'RE BARRICADED UP IN YOUR SUSPICIOUS OLD MANSION AND OUTSIDE, ABOUT TO TEAR THROUGH YOUR PRECIOUS JEFFIROTH, IS A TRIO OF UGLY-ASS ORGANIZATION MEMBERS DEAD SET ON RUINING MY PLANS. WHAT DO YOU DO? PLEASE, TELL ME. WHAT DO YOU DO?"

"Well, I was thinking we could implement Plan X," Marley-dono spoke up shyly.

A chord of dramatic music blasted out of nowhere. It was actually Jeffiroth's orchestra outside warming up, but pretend we didn't know that.

"*PLAN X?*"the Grand Master Fangirl gasped.

Another chord.

"Yeeeeeaaah... I know it's risky an' all but, ooh, can you just imagine how awesome it'd work if it did work?" Marley-dono giggled, fluttering his eyelashes in joy at the very thought. "Rows an' rows of 'em, all shiny an' beautiful..."

"VERY WELL," the Grand Master Fangirl sighed. *"I'LL IMPLEMENT PLAN X FOR YOU. BUT YOU LISTEN TO ME WELL, MARLEY-DONO. THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE. I BROUGHT YOUR BEAUTIFUL GUTLESS ASS INTO THIS WORLD AND I CAN TAKE IT RIGHT BACK OUT, ARE WE CLEAR?"*

"Crystal, honey, crystal," Marley-dono clapped his hands together excitedly.

Imagine the most evil, unscrupulous, sadistic, vicious and cruel villain from any book, movie, video game or TV show you'd like. Go ahead. Picture him or her very clearly in your head.

Add wings. Lots of wings. Three sets of wings—an angel's, a demon's, and a fairy's. Add one more wing that slipped in there by mistake, a shiny rainbow-colored feathery one that might be found on more exotic species of parrots.

Add leather. Lots of leather. Black leather. Yards and yards of it, tight and constricting, wrapping every inch of skin that isn't otherwise covered by chains and

spikes.

Add hair. Lots of hair. Yards and yards of it, long and silky, all the way down to the floor and wrapped around the ankles three or four times, so long it strangles poor innocent woodland creatures trying to scurry by it on their way home. We are talking some Badass Locks.

Add sparkles. And an unearthly evil glowing aura of darkness. Add a little rain cloud overhead that spews down a constant shower of blood and tears.

Add a 100-piece orchestra, a full choir, a pyrotechnics display and Nobuo Uematsu conducting.

You now have a vague inkling of Jeffiroth's second form. Jeffiroth Squared. Jeffiroth Redux. Jeffiroth Two: Electric Boogaloo.

He was so badass his font was bolded. **"And now you shall learn, and you shall fear, and you shall learn to fear the wrath... of Jeffiroth!"** he cackled maniacally.

"Jeffiroth!" the choir with orchestral accompaniment sang.

Xaldin sipped the last of his strawberry-banana coconut dream smoothie and tossed the cup into a nearby trash bin, standing up and stretching. "All right gentlemen, time to get down to business." His lances appeared in his hands and floating around him as they had before.

"Just like we discussed," Lexaeus mumbled under his breath, recalling his tomahawk.

"Deep concentration," Vexen stepped back a few yards away from the others and began to focus his energy into one hand.

"Are you fools finally ready to face me down?" Jeffiroth laughed, drawing his seven-foot sword once again, **"We have battled before, but that was only warm-ups! You cannot comprehend my strength, and the strength you would have to have to defeat me! I will send all three of you back into the darkness of oblivion where you belong!"**

"We'll see," Xaldin glanced at Lexaeus. "Let's attempt Maneuver 35, shall we?"

"Let's," Lexaeus slammed his tomahawk down into the ground and the entire

courtyard began to rumble from the force. The rumbling continued until the earth beneath them seemed to be boiling and churning, ripping through the grass and giving rise to a thick layer of sand and rocks and stones.

Xaldin lifted one of his lances to the sky and the wind rumbled and churned in a great cyclone, round and round, drawing leaves from the nearby trees into its roaring grip and soon lifting the sand and rocks as well.

Vexen knelt down and placed his hands against the ground.

The vortex soon became a sandstorm, spinning wildly out of control and lifting high up towards the sky, a mighty testament to the abilities of the Organization's Number Three and Five.

"Pitiful," Jeffiroth laughed. "You expect me to be held back by something so foolish as a sandstorm? I will cleave your pathetic sandstorm in HALF and you will learn to fear Jeffiroth!"

"Jeffiroth!" the choir with orchestral accompaniment sang.

Jeffiroth flapped all seven wings and lifted himself high up into the air, almost as high as the sandstorm reached, and began to focus his energy. He lifted his sword up behind him and prepared a mighty lunge, waiting until his choir got to the most dramatic part of the song to do so.

"Get ready," Lexaeus mumbled down on the ground. Xaldin nodded, still busily keeping the cyclone at its most turbulent.

And faster than you can see "Kamehameha!" or "Ma-nah ma-nah!" or even "Da, da, da!" Jeffiroth did a triple twister backflip back handspring, circled in the air and came soaring down like a hawk, all the way down to the ground and effortlessly slicing straight through the sandstorm. Chunks of rock and earth and a gust of wind flew out in all directions as the storm came crashing down all over the courtyard in a dramatic whoosh.

Jeffiroth struck a pose in midair, cackling maniacally as his stormcloud rained blood all around and his choir kicked it into overdrive—it was time for the techno remix. **"You stupid foolish fools! You foolishly thought you could fool Jeffiroth, you fools? So much for your precious Maneuver 35! I will now tear you asunder!"**

He spun around to take a mighty chop out of our three heroes with his giant

sword, but found, for some reason, his head could not spin as gracefully and threateningly as before. He jerked his head as hard as he could to the side and quickly found out why when there came the sound of a huge "CLNK!", followed by a thud.

All nine or so feet of Jeffiroth's luxurious Badass Locks of silver hair lay frozen in a great chunk of ice on the ground beneath him. In the ten or so seconds of posing and threats since he landed from his mighty demonstration against Xaldin and Lexaeus's sandstorm, Vexen had made his move and promptly froze the Gutless' hair into a long, Badass Block of ice. The unfortunate thing about Badass Locks is that as badass as they are, they are not immune to the weaknesses of regular hair, and that includes the weakness that is proneness for snapping when frozen into a solid block of ice and subjected to a firm jerking of the head.

Jeffiroth stared in abject horror at his Badass Locks upon the ground, then up at the threesome of Nobodies who were responsible.

"Oh... my... god... my... HAIR!" Jeffiroth screamed, a shrill, horrible sound and fell immediately to the ground on his knees, clutching the broken strands in his hands and shrieking, **"NO! NO! IT CAN'T BE! Not... say it... say it ain't so... it can't be this is... this is a bad dream, it must be! A terrible, terrible, horrible dream!"**

"Jeffiroth!" the choir sang.

"NO! NO! SHUT UP, YOU IDIOTS, CAN'T YOU SEE THIS IS AN EMERGENCY?" Jeffiroth turned to his choir and shrieked in rage. **"MY HAIR! IT'S RUINED!"**

"Good shot, Vexen," Xaldin congratulated him, catching his breath after the strain of holding the cyclone for so long.

"Thank you, Xaldin," Vexen adjusted his gloves and looked very proud of himself.

"I didn't really think he'd get so worked up about his hair," Lexaeus said as they watched a sobbing Jeffiroth trying as hard as he could to reattach the nine-foot mass back to his head. "It's almost a little... sad."

"Terribly," Xaldin rolled his eyes.

"LOOK AT ME! I'M HIDEOUS! LOOK!" Jeffiroth howled, standing up and clawing at the back of his head. **"I AM NO SILENT WIND OF DOOM IN THIS! I**

AM NOTHING TO BE FEARED OR EVEN REMOTELY NERVOUS OF... with this... short... hair..."

"Oh no. We're not frightened of you at *all*," Vexen enunciated. "Long hair, oh, yes, perhaps, but that terrible crew-cut you have now?"

"I must end my shame," Jeffiroth said numbly, turning his blade on himself to commit seppuku.

Unfortunately, a seven-foot long katana, while badass and certainly intimidating, is just not all that practical for seppuku. What followed was a ten minute display of Jeffiroth trying in vain to impale himself on a sword that was taller than he was, in full view of his choir and Nobuo Uematsu.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus looked on from nearby, terribly amused. It appeared Jeffiroth would be busy for a long, long time.

"Well, after that anti-climactic display, my vote is that we head inside to deal with Marluxia's Seme," Lexaeus suggested.

"A very good suggestion. Let's be on our—" Xaldin began, but paused as there was suddenly a flash of light that brought a new silhouette down into the courtyard. "... what the hell is that?"

The glow around the silhouette dissipated and the newcomer slowly stood up, holding up his hand to reveal a sparkling golden Keyblade.

"A Keyblade?" Vexen said nervously, taking a few steps back for caution's sake.

"That's right," the newcomer said, lifting his head to reveal sparkling white teeth, a heroic grin, and the Gutless tattoo that had only seconds ago appeared on his torso. "My name is Kain Bakayorou..."

A second silhouette flashed down and landed in the hedges, but crawled out a moment later and cried "My name is Raven Ikareponchi!"

"Tsuki Shuugyofu!" yelled the third silhouette from the doorway of the garden shed.

"Turbo Hihibaba!" the fourth silhouette shouted.

A cacophony of voices drowned out at least 400 other names, and soon there were

404 Keyblades lifting up into the air above them and 404 voices shouting, "AND AS THE KEYBEARER, I WILL DESTROY YOU!"

On the top floor of the mansion, peering out a window was Marluxia's Seme, laughing hysterically at how beautiful the implementation of Plan X really was.

"Well shit," said Xaldin appropriately as he, Vexen and Lexaeus positioned back to back in the middle of the courtyard, keeping an eye on the advancing hoards of Keybearers.

"We'll just have to fight them off," Lexaeus growled.

"I'm exhausted from the cyclone," Xaldin said quickly. "I need a chance to recover."

"There's too many!" Vexen hissed in frustration. "And I don't care if they're the real Keybearers or not—on this world they might as well be!"

"We will *not* be giving up so easily!" Xaldin snapped, breathing heavily to try and recover as quickly as he could. "The Organization never says die!"

"DIE! DIE YOU FILTHY SONS OF BITCHES!"

There rose a sudden gasp among the Keybearers as suddenly great numbers of them began to explode into sizzling chunks for no readily apparent reason. Thunder and lightning rained from the heavens in great bursts, combusting groups of the hapless Keybearer Gutless right and left.

"What the hell is that?" Vexen yelled.

"The last thing we need! Another Mary Sue?" Xaldin groaned.

"No, worse," Lexaeus said with a smirk, gesturing off towards the doorway of the mansion. "It's Larxene."

Indeed, the Organization's Number Twelve, the Savage Nymph was back to her most savage and nymphiest. She stood on the porch of the mansion calling down great bolts of thunder and lightning, her face contorted into a look that could not be translated as anything else but pure straight seething hatred. "SON OF A BITCH BASTARD DARE TO SCREW WITH ME, I'LL KICK YOUR ASSES AND TAKE YOUR NAMES!" she shrieked, taking the opportunity to impale a few of the Gutless nearest her with entire handfuls of kunai.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus watched in abject horror for a moment, musing over the brutality of the sole female member of Organization XIII and wondering how in the hell she could have gotten over her episode as Xuxastell so quickly. They then decided that they were musings for another time, and proceeded to beat the living crap out of every Gutless within reach.

To make a long story short, in no time at all the Keybearer army and Plan X had been laid to waste, and Larxene reunited with her brethren in the middle of the courtyard, taking the opportunity to fix her hair.

"Hello boys," she said in the voice of a woman who has not just murdered several hundred annoying teenagers. "How's crimes?"

"Significantly more violent all of a sudden," Xaldin replied without missing a beat.

"What happened?" Vexen gaped in shock. "How did you restore yourself? Xuxastell had taken your place by some means I don't even understand!"

"Oh, you mean that pod thing?" Larxene shrugged. "I'm not sure. All I know is I woke up and suddenly here I am, back where I belong. *Tell me* you didn't actually think *she* had really replaced me."

"Of course not, Number Twelve," Lexaeus assured her. "We would never think of replacing you."

"Good," Larxene smiled sweetly and suddenly her expression darkened. "Oh yeah—they Gutless things! I take it you three figured out what the hell's going on?"

"We certainly have, and we are in the process of repairing things as they should be," Xaldin told her. "Hence our presence here. But we understand you took some measures of your own before your untimely capture?"

"Damn right I did," Larxene snapped. "Damned if I care about most of the others, but I sure as hell ain't working with a bunch of sobbing pansies, I can tell you that much!"

"How nice of you," Vexen said icily.

"Marluxia's Seme is inside. We must destroy him and regain his... you know in order to replace it back within the real Marluxia's body," Lexaeus explained.

"Or at least, whatever... you know Marluxia even had," Vexen glanced off to the side, twiddling his thumbs.

"Oh yes," Larxene smiled a positively evil smile, lacing her fingers together excitedly. "I've got a bone to pick with him."

Marley-dono was in his basement laboratory, pacing back and forth and trying, oh, trying to figure out some way out of this scrape. Xuxastell had disappeared. Jeffiroth was outside trying to impale himself. Plan X had failed miserably. The Grand Master Fangirl was not returning his calls. And the choir and orchestra were demanding 7 more per hour than originally agreed upon.

He fingered his limp, stressed-out, frizzy hair sadly and lamented the death of a fine, fine crop of man locks.

He also lamented the fact that the man who was the owner of those fine, fine man locks was also on the verge of death, if he couldn't come up with a good idea, real fast, of how to deal with the three intruders.

Stupid Xuxastell! Where was she when he needed her? All he ever had to do with that dunce was point and say that Axel would be very proud of her if she did such and such or had this or that done by whatever time that afternoon. There was just no kind of help quite like the gullible brainwashed and hired kind.

"Marluxia! Oh, rather- Marley-dono!"

A long chill ran down Marley-dono's spine as he heard the basement door slam open and swift footsteps down the stairs. It was nothing compared to the chill, however, when he turned around to find Larxene facing him down as the three intruders watched from far, far away. The big beefy cute one was holding a glowing Tupperware dish for some reason Marley-dono did not really want to contemplate.

Larxene smiled sweetly at him and tightened her gloves. "It's been a while, hasn't it? A couple days at least, since we last spoke!"

Marley-dono backed as far as he could against his lab equipment and picked up a small spray bottle labeled "GIRL REPELLANT", coating himself with a few spritzes. "Wh-why no! It must have been sooner than that, Ms. Larxene! The time... it seems..." he made a face and became very, very pale. "Way, way too short, honey."

"Oh, my thoughts exactly," there was something terribly dangerous lurking in Larxene's voice as she stepped towards him. With nowhere else to go Marley-dono hopped up on the table behind him, looking right and left for some opportunity to escape.

"Sister, let's talk this out all nice 'n gentle, mmkay?" Marley-dono smiled sweetly and very, very hopefully.

"Mm... no, I don't *think* so," Larxene replied equally sweetly, kunai forming between each of her fingers.

"Oh come ON!" Marley-dono cried out, glancing behind Larxene to the three men at the other side of the room. "You sadistic bastards would leave me to a fate like *this*?"

"Can't say you don't particularly deserve it," Lexaeus said with a shrug.

"Meanie-pants," Marley-dono babbled incoherently as Larxene made her slow approach. "You! All three of you! Are MEANIE-PANTS! And homophobes!"

All three of them sighed heavily.

"We've been over that," Xaldin touched his forehead as though he was getting a major headache. "Larxene, if you would?"

"I'd be happy to," she snickered, tightening her fists.

"Oh *please* not in the face," Marley-dono sobbed.

"Don't worry!" Larxene assured him.

Several hours later, our heroes were back aboard the G.S. Existentialist and once again drifting aimlessly through space on their way through Fandom Hearts. Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus were taking the time to relax before the next sanity-testing world. Larxene had hopped back aboard the gummi ship she stole and was on her way back to The World That Never Was as they spoke, with orders to keep an eye on things and assist Axel in any picture-taking that needed to happen. They were certain she would be zealous and up to the task.

It was time for the heavy-handed moralistic section of the story.

On the bridge, Lexaeus sat with the Tupperware, watching the two you knows drifting aimlessly about within, occasionally bumping into each other and each emitting a soft and almost entrancing glow. "That world was less horrifying than I expected it to be," he admitted.

"Indeed. It is not so much horrifying as it is annoying," Vexen cut in, "Nine times out of ten they come looking for the invocations of the people they know and love—it is frustrating to be constantly met with boring, trite and unoriginal invocations of somebody's friends or even themselves. All the worse if said invocations are Mary Sues."

"In the end, the City of OC is simply a world of wish fulfillment. There is nothing terribly wrong with wish fulfillment, after all," Xaldin agreed, sitting in a nearby chair with his feet propped up on an instrument panel. "What many do not realize is that when they post their own wish-fulfillment publicly, it may not receive the warm welcome they are hoping as it is a very personal sort of thing. To go on to whining and bitching about it only make the genre as a whole more unbearable."

"They may create whatever they like, of course," Lexaeus added on. "But they need to be prepared to face the facts and understand that what tickles their fancy and excites them may not apply to the thousands of others that their worlds affect—unlike the common factors of the real invocations of characters that draw them into Fandom Hearts in the first place."

"Well-said," Vexen nodded.

"Indeed," Xaldin agreed.

"Mmm, Xaldin," Gexegee called from the direction of the ship's bedroom. "Come back to bed! We're not out of whipped cream yet!"

There was a long moment of silence as the three Nobodies regarded each other.

"Who let her on here?" Xaldin sighed immensely, placing a hand to his forehead.

"I believe she may have written herself in," Lexaeus shrugged.

"I vote we deploy her from the airlock," Vexen said suddenly.

"No, no. I ought to deal with her myself," Xaldin stood up and stretched, making his way through the door. "I'll be in my bunk."

Once he had gone, Vexen let out a disgusted huff and set the gummi ship on autopilot.

"God I hate fangirls," he snapped.

The G.S. Existentialist drifted along through the cosmos, very quickly jettisoning a screaming body from the back airlock but never ceasing in its triumphant journey to the next world.

Wow. I ought to write stories like this more often.

Hope you kidlings enjoyed the chapter and laughed at least once or twice. I do love it when you drop me a line, positive or negative, so review copiously and maybe I'll send you a special edition of the chapter where *you* might or might not get to boff Xaldin but actually get thrown out an airlock.

Or maybe not...?

Rainy Day Woman No 12 and 35

Chapter Six: Rainy Day Woman #12 and 35

Somewhere across the universe, very far away from where the G.S. Existentialist drifted lazily through space, somewhere all the way past chapter nine, there was a shadowy figure perched at the loft window on the very top floor of a tall, dark skyscraper.

He stared down at the dark buildings below, something wicked and sadistic glinting in the corners of his dark eyes. The room around him was dark save for the soft flickering of several black lights, illuminating the dark monitor of a screen across the room. The screen hadn't been dark until just a few seconds ago, when the black-patterned desktop and dark icons vanished beneath the black veil of a sleeping computer.

The man stared darkly out of the window, thinking dark thoughts of the dark news he'd just received. Just to mix the prose up a little bit, we'll substitute some colorful words in for "dark". For the rest of this scene, if you see a color word, assume that the narrator probably means "dark". Or possibly "black". On the other hand, this will discredit any accurate color descriptions for the rest of the scene... it really doesn't matter. The room was far too you-know-what for anybody to really see colors anyway.

"Marley-dono, Aku-chan, Xuxastell and Xiggy-kun have all been eliminated," he said pinkly to nobody in particular. A blue look washed over his face and his lips curled ever-so-slightly. "And what's worse, those nuisance Nobodies are still alive and making their way slowly in this direction."

Magenta robes curled around his feet as he turned from the window and strode back across the room, mumbling crimson thoughts to himself and trying to consider what to do. "The Grand Master Fangirl is already displeased with our performances, even allowing those three to get this far. We shall have to shape up if we don't want to see her truly furious," the sunshine yellow man pondered to himself. "I will have to take Operation Other into overdrive in the hopes that I can finish it up before they get here... and I will pass the message onto my four surviving comrades in the hopes that at least one of them will be able to take it up to par and defeat those nuisances. BooWAHAHAHAHAHAH!"

The burnt sienna man took a moment to please himself with a hearty maniacal laugh, slowly drifting off and staring out of the prose, where the readers were baffled and a little put-off by the extremely vague exposition.

"Why am I telling you this now?" he asked with a chartreuse frown. "Get back to the present storyline and we'll talk later! Go on! Get out of here!"

On the very opposite side of the universe, somewhere between darkness and light and just barely out of existence, Xigbar just had to know what recipe Demyx used to get his cookies crispy on the outside but chewy on the inside.

"Dude these are... dare I say it... *the best things I have ever tasted?*" he said enthusiastically, taking a nip from the side of his fourth cookie and happily adjusting his sun hat with pink and purple flowers on the brim.

"Oh you know a little ginger, a little cinnamon," Demyx blushed and giggled like a schoolgirl, doing a little twirl in his flower apron. "My granny passed me this recipe in her cookbook!"

"Oh pshaw, Mrs. Cranshaw, don't be so *modest!*" Luxord tittered girlishly, pawing at the sparkly earrings he'd found. "More tea, Mrs. Nesbitt?"

"Please and thank you, Mrs. Wong!" Marluxia squealed and bounced in his seat. "There's *jasmine* in this batch!"

"Do you think this arrangement needs a few more daisies in it, Mrs. Nesbitt?" asked Saïx with deep concern. "Really, be honest!"

"Oh no, Mrs. Tremain it looks faaaaaaabulous," Marluxia said between sips. "Mmm! Hit me with another spot of sugar, would you love?"

"Right awaaaaaay!" sang Xemnas, once he'd put down his blush and mascara. "Ooh, perk up there Mrs. Bloodmoon! The banana bread'll be done in only a few minutes!"

Zexion sighed longingly. "Oh I *hope* so, Mrs. DeVille. I'm so hungry."

"Ladies!" Larxene squealed suddenly from the doorway, running into the employee lounge with a stack of silky dresses in all the colors of the rainbow. "Look what I found in my closet!"

"Oh those old things?" Demyx gasped. "And retro is so totally chic this year!"

"Mmm, is that *silk*?" Marluxia cooed with pleasure.

"Oh yeah, look at that lovely mint green and pink polka-dotted one, Marluxia," Larxene encouraged him. "It would look soooo good on you!"

"Hey- HEY!" Marluxia suddenly snapped, glaring up at Larxene like she'd just kicked his puppy or called his mother ugly (Vexen would remind you that this is figuratively speaking, as Nobodies technically don't have mothers,) "*Don't break character, Lar-Lar! I! Am MissusNesbitt.*"

Though the initial disgust at being called "Lar-Lar" was apparent on her face, Larxene managed to shift into a cool, sweet smile at his insistence. "Right, right. I apologize, Mrs. Nesbitt."

"Um, um, um," Luxord hopped from foot to foot. "C-can we maybe try them on, Lar-Lar?"

"Ooh, yeah, that red one would look absolutely *ravishing* with my hat dude!" Xigbar leapt from his seat, stomping his feet excitedly and pointing.

"Ohmigawd you should *totally* try it on, Mrs. Andrzejewski!" Larxene said excitedly. "You all can! In fact I insist!"

"YAY!" came a shout of voices.

Larxene dropped the stack of dresses on the table and stepped back as the other Nobodies set upon them like a pack of screeching women buying wedding dresses at a 70 percent off clearance sale, "Now ladies, don't rip them! You want them all nice and pretty for the picture!"

"Don't worry honey, we're totally gonna play nice!" Saïx held a lavender slip up to compare it with the color of his hair.

"AWMIGAWD the banana bread!" Demyx shrieked suddenly and leapt for the oven.

Larxene leaned against the wall smugly, crossing her arms and relishing the scene.

"You utter, utter bitch," said a droll voice.

"What? It's called being 'opportunistic'," she shrugged casually.

"If there's a hell for people like us, I hope you know you're going straight to it," Axel shook his head, traces of laughter on his face regardless.

Larxene stared at him and raised her eyebrow with a huff. "I'll meet you there. What do you call that?"

"What, this? It's called being '*absolutely friggin' hilarious*'," Axel said of the video camera on his shoulder.

Somewhere right in between the far side of Fandom Hearts and the far side of the canon universe—so basically, smack in the middle of Fandom Hearts, the G.S. Existentialist had reached the next world and Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus had disembarked.

Unfortunately, as the DEM Engines propelled them downwards and into the world's atmosphere, they were suddenly met with a great deal of turbulence, as was the nature of this world. Getting into this world was really the hard part, they discovered—a cheerful sign posted above it proudly proclaimed the fact ("WELCOME! 10,239 FAILURES TODAY :) "). Success in this twisted and unusual world rested on a smooth and logical entry, which our heroes unfortunately failed to pull off.

Before Lexaeus knew it, he was lying flat on his back on the ground, staring up at the sky and reeling from the after-effects of the DEM Engine's failure.

It took him a few minutes to find his bearings after the rough landing—even when you are a large and sturdy man, it *hurts* when you collide with a planet after free-falling from some ten thousand feet in the air. He slowly sat up and rubbed his head, glancing around at his surroundings.

The first thing Lexaeus noticed was that he was in the countryside, on the border of some lush forest and a wide open meadowland, covered in tall grasses and swishing flowers and a scenic little river that twisted and bent across the landscape. He reached back behind him into Hammerspace for the world guidebook he'd been keeping only to find it had vanished... damn, must have left it back on the gummi ship by mistake.

The next thing he noticed was that he was alone. Xaldin and Vexen were nowhere

to be found, and Lexaeus could hear the voice of the earth confirming that there were no Nobody-shaped craters like the one he'd created on entry anywhere nearby. The turbulence must have separated them from one another.

Ah well, Lexaeus shrugged. Xaldin and Vexen would be around somewhere—and it wasn't like any of the three couldn't take care of themselves. He was certainly all right on his own. Xaldin had six lances for cryin' out loud—he could take on a small army of Gutless by himself. And Vexen sometimes had a bit of trouble controlling his temper when left to his own devices, but lucky for him "his own devices" usually involved lots of pain and maiming for the ones who crossed him.

Conveniently for Lexaeus, there happened to be a road not far from where he'd impacted, and not too far up the road there was a road sign. He took a final look around at his surroundings then carefully stepped over some endangered flora specimens and onto the road, making his way over.

At least, that's what he planned to do, until he was startled by the feeling of some sharp object embedding itself in the sole of his left boot.

Lexaeus lifted his foot and reached down to dislodge whatever it was, sturdy enough to have sunk down through a full inch and a half of the finest Organization XIII standard issue treaded boots. He lifted it up and examined it between two thick fingers—some broken piece of something. It looked like a shard of glass or crystal, not too terribly interesting. Probably just a piece of something somebody dropped and forgot to clean up.

Decrying the state of the National Open Space services in this strange new world, Lexaeus made a motion as to drop the shard into his pocket for later disposal. Suddenly, there sounded a growling voice behind him.

"Hold it, buddy! Hand over the jewel shard and I won't cleave you to bits!"

Lexaeus and the readers shared a similarly awful sinking feeling as they realized exactly what sort of world he'd just landed on.

"If there is a merciful deity of the Nobodies, or any sort of deific presence out there looking out for me," Lexaeus said in a calm, but very serious voice, "Please, let me have landed *anywhere* but..."

He slowly turned around and if he'd had a heart, would have felt it sinking down into utter misery at the sight of a young man with big red pants, dog ears, and a hip-length shock of impossibly poofy white hair.

"Hey!" the young man snapped, pointing a clawed finger and hefting a tremendous sword. "Didn't you hear me! I said hand over the jewel shard!"

Lexaeus's face met the palm of his hand. "... Inuyasha."

"I see you've heard of me!" Inuyasha grinned smugly, throwing his sword back to rest on his shoulder. "Now hand over the jewel shard and I won't have to kill you!"

"Okay, fine," Lexaeus pulled the jewel shard back out of his pocket and without hesitation tossed it across the way to land at the half-demon's feet.

Inuyasha stared at the shard, then back up at the tremendous man in black. Then down at the shard again. Then back to Lexaeus. "Wait—you're just... giving me the shard?"

"Yes?" Lexaeus raised an eyebrow. "You asked for it."

"But you're the bad guy," Inuyasha scratched his head, confused. "You're supposed to take the jewel shard and run off with it."

"Why would I?"

"Because... you're the bad guy," Inuyasha repeated, apparently baffled by Lexaeus's unwillingness to start trouble. "You're supposed to laugh in my face about losing the shard, and then run off with it and use it in your evil plans."

"And how would I use such a ridiculous thing in any sort of evil plans?" Lexaeus reasoned with him. "Aside from poking you with it and causing puncture wounds, of course."

"Well, it's a shard of the Shikon Jewel!" Inuyasha argued. "Everybody wants the Shikon Jewel."

"I don't," Lexaeus informed him.

"Why not?" Inuyasha almost looked insulted.

"Because I've never heard of it and I don't know what it does," Lexaeus replied. "I assume from your reaction it has some sort of supernatural properties to it, and there are a lot of people who would go out of their way to get a hold of it. Do you often have a problem of strangers and off-worlders appearing and trying to snatch it away from you for their own ends?"

"Hell yes," Inuyasha snapped. "Over a hundred and sixty episodes' worth."

"Good grief," Lexaeus marveled, "You used that hackneyed plot for *that* long?"

Lexaeus knew he had misspoken when he suddenly felt the glares of the half-demon before him as well as his hordes of adoring fans, all the way through their computer monitors and transcending across the very boundaries of reality.

"You did *not* just go there," Inuyasha said accusatorily.

"I rather think I did," Lexaeus shrugged it off.

"Well, don't rag on me about repetitive plotlines. It worked for Dragonball Z," Inuyasha said with a huff.

He suddenly had the very same feeling that somewhere out there, people were loathing him for insulting a cartoon.

"Did I just go there?"

"I rather think you did," Lexaeus cleared his throat and continued hurriedly. "In any case, today is your lucky day, as I don't consider myself the type to run around and cause trouble for people without any good reason, particularly in the name of an artifact I don't know anything about and don't particularly desire."

"No, no," Inuyasha's face was turning almost as pale as his impossibly puffy hair as he stepped out, utterly ignoring the jewel shard that had landed by his feet. "You don't understand. You *have* to go for the jewel."

"No, I don't," Lexaeus turned to head in his original direction towards the signpost.

"No. You don't *understand*!"

The feeling of something small and sharp bouncing off his shoulder had Lexaeus pause and glance back. Inuyasha had chucked the shard at him, and was backing away from him, hands tightening around the handle of his sword.

"You *have* to go for the jewel. Or I'm *dead meat*."

"Why?"

"Because," Inuyasha swallowed heavily, eyes darting shiftily around as though looking for some shape in the shadows of the woods. "*He* wouldn't like that."

"'He'?" Lexaeus asked.

"Yes... *he* would be furious," Inuyasha was positively trembling in his shoes—or would have been, if he wore any shoes. "*He* insists that we follow the plotlines exactly as specified... w-we can't stray off of 'em or anything... And h-he'll deal with me if I don't do as he says... *He* rules this world."

"And what, precisely, is this world?" Lexaeus asked impatiently, as they were already six pages into the chapter and it hadn't really been mentioned.

Inuyasha motioned to the signpost with a trembling finger. It appeared to be a mile marker sign for a variety of locations, but the arrows had been mostly broken off except for the one on the top that read

INEPT CROSSINGS

"Well, I apologize for being unable to help you with your problem," Lexaeus continued studying the sign, intuition directing him to an arrow that read "T. TOWN" and another that read "MIDNIGHT MOONRAVEN MCGEE CASTLE". "But I have no desire to take your little jewel piece. You'll have to find somebody else to—"

Lexaeus was interrupted as he stepped on another important plot device about as large as a medium-sized jawbreaker. He lifted his foot and glanced down at the road to see a glistening red stone.

Against his better judgment, he reached down to pick it up, only to hear a new, low-to-the-ground voice from behind him screaming, "Okay, ugly! You better give me that Philosopher's Stone, right this instant!"

"Oh *hell*," Lexaeus groaned.

Luckily for Xaldin, he was not having the same sort of problems as Lexaeus. However, Xaldin had also landed in an extremely different sort of environment than his comrade.

He found himself wandering through an altogether miserable bleak, desolate stretch of trashy, abandoned buildings. The rain-soaked cobblestone streets were

cracked and broken, and weak fires roared in trashcans on the street corners, guarded by forlorn-looking locals in tattered jackets with torn umbrellas.

A dilapidated sign on the side of one of the buildings read "WELCOME TO TOONTOWN".

Any other badass man in a black coat would have been baffled to find the inhabitants of this dreary slum to be a variety of anthropomorphic cartoon animals and people, but this is a member of Organization XIII we're talking about—"Be Prepared", remember? Not to mention Xaldin was quite used to writing off the appearances of animated creatures—his Somebody had often played poker with the other apprentices and Ansem the Wise's friend King Mickey. The accursed rat *still* owed him fifty munny.

Unfortunately, it did not look like the town as a whole possessed even fifty munny. The cartoon inhabitants did not look at all their usual cheery selves, sitting around, walking with their heads down low, dressed in little more than rags and doing whatever they could to scrape together enough to buy food or find a place to sleep for the night.

Xaldin surveyed the sights around him as he walked, off-handedly wondering where Lexaeus and Vexen had gotten off to. Fortunately he'd grabbed the guidebook from the gummi ship before their impromptu departure, and was strolling around to see if he could get the computer to detect any Nobody signals—Vexen's, Lexaeus's, or otherwise.

A large group of animals (the four-legged variety) had gathered in one of the alleys; mutts, cocker spaniels, basset hounds, afghan hounds, Chihuahuas, Great Danes, Dalmatians (or were they Labradors? Tough to tell for all the dirt in their fur), a fox, cats in all variety of colors from black to white to orange and striped and in between. They sat, staring forlornly at passersby with sad animal eyes in the hopes of snagging some scraps from someone with a big heart.

Near the end of Jones Blvd sat a broken-down llama with a sign around its neck reading "LLAMA MILK: 10 MUNNY A CUP".

"Kuzco, you can't get milk from a male llama," a nearby man informed him.

"You *can't*?" the llama looked horrified. "NOOHOHOHO! My lucrative business!"

A young woman dressed in rags was doing her best to sweep the cobwebs from the porch of one of the broken-down houses, a house that appeared to have an

obscene pest problem—bugs seemed to have built an entire city outside it and the mice were so settled in they were developing an advanced society, complete with clothing.

Crowds of animals stood around burning trashcans to warm themselves, while a rooster with a lute strummed nearby and tried to cheer them up with a depressing song about downs outnumbering the ups. A badger stood at a podium, preaching a sermon—"Now stay strong, my brothers and sisters, stay strong! Follow a good path in life! Do your best every day, work hard, and you will not perish, oh no! You will live forever in reruns, happy in the kingdom of Syndication!"

Children in filthy pajamas dug through stacks of garbage, salvaging what they could of abandoned toys—puppets, action figures, and one tattered little teddy bear clutched in the arms of one small child.

"What a dreadful little town," Xaldin commented to no one in particular.

"Oh yes, I agree," came a voice belonging to a white rabbit in slacks tugging at his coat.

Xaldin glanced down at the ridiculous creature, taking his coat in one hand and tugging it back away. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all!" the rabbit grinned. "You're new in town, right?"

"Just passing through," Xaldin assured him.

"Well, everybody always thinks they are," the rabbit replied, running to keep up with Xaldin, who'd gained a bead on a suspicious signal a few blocks away. "But everybody who comes to Toontown always stays forever..."

"I'd heard of Toontown," Xaldin figured a little small talk with the rabbit wouldn't be uncalled for, even if he would look rather silly. Not to mention the exposition was rather lacking in the chapter so far. "I had thought it a much nicer place than this."

"Not in Inept Crossings!" the rabbit lamented. "This world's different. It's a big mishmash of all sorts'a worlds, see, and in the old days, every time there was a new invocation we Toons would star in it! But not anymore... we haven't had work in *ages!*"

"That's unfortunate," Xaldin sounded as though he wasn't exactly listening.

"You're tellin' me! The overlords keep connectin' new worlds... 'cept all the new worlds get all the work and we're stuck here eating beans and begging for change! On that note... can I interest you in some insurance?"

"Insurance?" Xaldin glanced down and noticed for the first time a tattered clipboard in the rabbit's yellow-gloved hands. "Whatever for?"

"It's 'getting the stuffing kicked outta you' insurance!" the rabbit said proudly. "A hundred munny a policy! Then I give you this nice piece of paper!" He held up a piece of newsprint with "INCHORANTS" written at the top in lipstick. "Roger Rabbit, esq." was written at the bottom in what appeared to be eyeliner.

"And how will a piece of paper protect me from getting the stuffing kicked out of me?" Xaldin posed a fair question.

"Well... I dunno," Roger shrugged. "But it doesn't hurt to try! Can I set you up for double coverage perhaps, sir?"

"I'd like to see anyone try to kick the stuffing out of me," Xaldin laughed somewhat haughtily. "I'm not interested."

He motioned as to step forward and on his way, but was stopped as Roger flung himself at his feet, sobbing. "PBBBBBBREEEEEEASE, SIR! I need the munny! If I can't pay for food this week, my wife Jessica has to go out and charge people for Pattycake!"

"I'm sorry. It is my Organization's policy not to interfere with the business of other worlds," Xaldin said—this was, of course, a flat-out lie. For gameplay purposes it was the Organization's policy only to interfere with the business of other worlds when there was an active Keybearer on duty.

Roger blubbered miserably. "But if I don't sell any policies today, Mr. Luxory's gonna... gonna..."

Xaldin's sideburns twitched and he finally stopped, staring down at the rabbit in shock. "Mr. Luxory?"

"Yeah... the big *jerk* that runs this town," a new voice belonging to a small goose child with red pigtails, wearing a sandwich board sign advertising Gosalyn Mallard's Maps and Travel information, 10 Munny For Consultation. "He's always down here kicking the stuffing out of us if we make him mad..."

"You oughta be glad you don't work for him!" Roger groaned, rubbing his backside.

"My dad's had the stuffing kicked out of him a million times," Gosalyn said proudly. "Maps and travel information, buddy?"

"Hey, back off! I saw him first!" Roger stood up angrily. "Go peddle your business over there!"

"Would you deny an innocent little girl the money she needs to bust her dad out of jail... again?" Gosalyn's eyes watered miserably and she sniffled.

"I'll pay both of you to leave me alone, if you tell me more about this Mr. Luxory," Xaldin interrupted their squabble in a sharp tone.

The goose and the rabbit stared in wonderment at the stranger, and burst out into a babbling screaming match.

"Mr. Luxory spends his Wednesdays down at the Ink and Paint Club and—"

"—He lives up in the castle up north with his colleague but he—"

"—Mostly spends his time dealing with all those weird guys from Japan out east—"

"—But he only comes here to kick the stuffing out of people and he keeps threatening to ruin our characters—"

"YEAH YEAH they ruin our characters, they've got this big awful machine—"

"It's not a machine, it's like a ray gun! POW!" Gosalyn protested suddenly.

"No, no, there's no ray gun!" yelled a mouse in a red hat near the ground. "It's smaller! It's more like... like a remote control..."

"No, Bernard—I really saw it as more of a charm or jewel," a second mouse in a purple hat shook her head.

"No, senor," a green parrot with a cigar approached, shaking his head. "They say it is their natural power! All you have to do is anger them and..."

"We haven't seen Aunt Daisy for weeks..." three small ducks yelled at the same time.

"They make living life here mabsolutely iserable—er, er... absolutely miserable!" a short, stuttering man in glasses and a weird hat shouted from a gathering crowd.

"YEAH!" echoed five of his friends as one in the back fell over.

"They're a bother," a stuffed bear said sadly.

"Are you here to save us?" a skinny, dark-haired boy in a red loincloth piped up excitedly.

"No," Xaldin raised his voice to be heard over the din of the gathering Toons. "I'm not here to—"

"He's here to save us!" the children shouted.

"HURRAY! THREE CHEERS FOR—" the crowd piped up, but quieted.

"... what was his name?"

"Xaldin," Xaldin said, bewildered.

"THREE CHEERS FOR XALDIN!"

Hearing people cheer his name wasn't so bad, Xaldin thought to himself as the Toons around him screamed and cried and hugged each other in joy. In fact, it was something he could get used to... on his own time, not when he should have been off rescuing the rest of his fallen comrades and finding out where in nothing Vexen and Lexaeus had gotten off to. He glanced at his watch and waited for a pause to ask that he please be excused so he could keep chasing the signal in the computer.

It wasn't until some quiet drumbeats in the background began to crescendo that he began to look noticeably uncomfortable.

"What are you doing?" he asked the Toons in a rising tone.

"Oh, it's customary around these parts, sir," Roger grinned.

"Oh the worlds will sing of a Nobody a thousand years from now!

And not because his sideburns or his braids or hot eyebrows!

While the evil ones up north keep all us Toons down on our knees

The great -"

"NOOO!"

The music screeched to a halt and Xaldin spun around, pointing and gesturing madly in some kind of enraged frenzy. "No singing! There will be *no singing* while I am here! Is that understood?"

"No... no singing?" the Toons muttered back and forth to each other.

"I don't see the problem," shrugged the later-era Disney movie characters.

"Absolutely no singing, or I am teleporting instantly back to my gummi ship and leaving you all to wallow in squalor!" Xaldin snapped.

"Sorry!" echoed the crowd.

"Now please do excuse me. I am going to find my comrades so we can figure out what to do about this Luxory fellow," Xaldin said, motioning for the crowd to part and let him on his way.

He headed on his way further down the street, intensely watching the beeping signal in the back of his book that indicated the presence of a Seme. A Nobody's signal was starting to register too. A wide smile spread on Xaldin's lips and he picked up the pace.

Once he had rounded a corner, the Toons all glanced back and forth to one another and-

"Who lit the flame in the torch of freedom?"

NUMBER THREE!

Who put the 'burns' in-"

"I HEARD that!" Xaldin yelled.

"SORRY!" the Toons apologized again.

Meanwhile, in a distant Toontown back alley, two unfortunate Toons were getting

the stuffing kicked out of them.

"Y'all come 'round here thinkin' y'all can walk peacefully an' all nice-like, HUH?" sniped a cruel voice, most likely belonging to the dark shadow looming across the alley. "Now what y'all goin' 'round thinkin' stupid crap like that, HUH?"

"NO SIR!" Bonkers T. Bobcat sobbed from the corner, cowering under his arms to protect himself from further vicious kicks from the assailant's very nice black and silver Bling-o-rama™ brand Platform Kickin' Shoes. "We have no right to walk peacefully and nice-like!"

"YEEEEAHYUH! Y'all wanna 'nother round! Cuz' there's plenty more where that came from, HUH? HUH!"

"YES SIR!" Tummi Gummi agreed woozily from his face-down position on the bricks. "We would *love* another round! We'd be honored!"

"Well now, lemme think..."

The prose camera panned up from the platforms, up the zebra-striped bellbottom pants and past the red velvet ruffy shirt, past the floor-length mink fur coat, past the twenty bulky silver and gold and diamond necklaces and past the exceptionally long feather on the pimp hat to where Luxord's Seme was carefully preening his goatee with a few fingers. He grinned slightly and suddenly screamed.

"TOO BAD! As much as he'd love to show you wankstas a little more've his Kickin' Shoes, Homie X Luxory's just got a ring-a-ling from his Burger King all up in HEEEEEEEAUHH," Homie X Luxory cackled and took a few steps back, glancing at his pager flashing and playing that stupid Gold Digger song that no radio station in America can stop playing for five minutes.

"Up in *what*?" Bonkers raised his head slightly.

"Here," Tummi whispered.

He was greeted with another cruel kick to the backside as Luxory laughed himself senseless.

"HUUUWHAT y'all jabberin' about! Y'all gonna miss me? HUH! HUH?"

"YES SIR!" both of the Toons wailed, covering their eyes to shield them from the blinding glint of the bling.

"Tha's what Luxory likes to hear! YEEEEAAAAYUH!" Luxory tossed his head and took a few steps backwards, presenting a mockingly polite bow of courtesy. "Well s'been real, y'all, but HOMIE X LUXORY'S gotta be gettin' on 'is way now, YEEEEAAAAYUH!" he let out a jubilant shriek and promptly vanished into a dark portal, leaving bear and bobcat alone in the alley to gather their stuffing.

"Boy, I didn't think we really deserved that," Tummi said with a dejected sigh.

"Oh, who ever does anymore?" Bonkers wailed, throwing a hand over his eyes dramatically. "This world's really gone to the dogs... the premises are stupid, the anime's run itself redundant, and Toontown's completely neglected. And to make matters worse, when we do get out and about, we poor Toons can't walk down the street without being savaged more brutally than a 4Kids dub!"

"Oh, you did *not* just go there," Tummi gasped.

"Y'know, I think I did," Bonkers said proudly.

It was a dark and stormy night at Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee. Then again, it usually was.

The castle that housed Inept Crossing's pair of evil overlords was stereotypically far to the north of Toontown, past the Woods of Overused Anime, beyond the Plains of Ill-Meshing Genres and Premises, and thankfully far from the oft-abused Harry Potter Canyon. It was a gothic affair with spikes, gargoyles and black stone comprising much of the architecture. What was not made of stone was made of moody tarnished gold and rubies, and what was not made of moody tarnished gold and rubies was made of blood-red velvet.

The one who'd called Homie G Luxory and spared the hapless cop and gummi bear from their merciless beating was none other than the Seme's partner-in-crime, the master of Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee (by merit of a coin flip). He was a cruel, shady, and altogether broody soul, a Gutless who rather than spending his days traipsing about kicking the stuffing out of Toons, preferred to spend them locked up within the walls of his castle.

Now, you may be tempted to think that perhaps, due to his solitary nature, the castle's master was somehow a less unpleasant character than his friend Luxory. Nothing could be further from the truth—he was every bit as obnoxious, sadistic and cruel as his partner.

There were many things to do in the castle that could still give him as nasty a reputation as his colleague—staring moodily down off of balconies, for instance. He took some time every day to work on his penmanship, writing threatening notes to his clients in blood red ink and stamping them with a skull-shaped seal. He was rather fond of playing the pipe organ. And he was widely regarded as a connoisseur of red wine, Bloody Marys, V8, Clamato, cherry Kool-Aid and any sort of beverage that gave the appearance of blood. Namely, blood.

His favorite pastime, however, was staring longingly at the moon, clad in his long black and red velvet robes and running his hands through his intricately styled silver-blue hair.

His name was Secks. And tonight he had a big, unsettling smile on his face.

The smile persisted as Luxory arrived from his black portal, sticking a dramatic landing on the stone floor by posing with his pimp-cane. "Yo-yo, Secks mah homie, what y'all- HOSNAP!"

"Luxory, whatever is the matter?" Secks oozed, for lack of a better word "gliding" across the room to meet him.

"Y'all ain't s'pposed t' smile, homeslice," Luxory's face twitched slightly—when Secks smiled, it was not a good thing. "HUUWHAT y'all be smokin'?"

"I all have not been smoking anything, my friend," Secks said dreamily, glancing back through the stained glass window at the full, bright moon. "But fortune has smiled down upon us this evening, after such unhappy news from the Superior earlier today regarding the deaths of our brethren."

"Tha's coo," Luxory strutted into the room, cracking his knuckles and plopping down for a seat in an overstuffed red velvet armchair. He tossed his hat to the side, hanging it on a bust of Anne Rice. "Wassup?"

"We are blessed with the presence of a *very* special guest," the corner's of Secks' mouth curled around pointed teeth. "And the Superior and the Grand Master Fangirl have requested we deal with him in a *very* special manner."

"YEEEEAYUH!" burst out Luxory happily. "Y'all waited t' do the honors now, ain't ya? Wouldn't leave y'all homeslice out've it, HUH? HUH!"

"Certainly not," Secks rose with a flourish from his long black cloak. "That is why I called you up here... we shouldn't keep our special guest waiting! It would be

terribly rude of us, as hosts, not to introduce ourselves as soon as possible."

"YEEEEAYUH!" Luxory agreed, throwing what he thought were gang signs but were actually Paper-Rock-Scissors gestures. He leapt from his chair, recovered his pimp hat and made his way to the door as giddy as a schoolgirl, but-

"But first..." Secks said in a lazy drawl.

"HUUWHAAAT!" Luxory screamed.

"I have been practicing on my *organ* today," Secks purred. "And there is something I would like to show you."

Luxory blinked a little bit at that statement, and responded with a vaguely turned-on "HUWHAT!"

"The *pipe* organ, you fool," Secks snapped. "Not *that* organ."

"Yo Homeslice, that still don't make it no better," Luxory blushed and scratched his head awkwardly.

"I've perfected that 'Angel The Corpse Of My Lovely' song on the pipe organ, now you are to come and give me a musical critique," Secks finally said impatiently.

"Maybe later for the..." Luxory mumbled.

"Yes. Maybe later. If..." Secks gazed out the window again, collapsing to his knees and clutching at his chest dramatically. "If... the moon permits..."

"YEEEEAYUH!"

A northern road out of Toontown led Xaldin to an ominous-looking crossroads, and that's where he ran into Lexaeus, moving at a rather rapid pace as though on the run from something.

"Lexaeus!" Xaldin smiled, and the guidebook's signal bleeped and faded out, confirming his presence. "Good, I was hoping I'd find you after not too long... Were you injured in the crash?"

"Good to see you as well, and I'm just fine, thank you," Lexaeus said, slightly out

of breath. "Where's Vexen?"

"I thought he might be with you," Xaldin frowned.

"No, I was by myself when I landed," he shook his head and bit his lip. "I wonder what's become of him... I hope he isn't dead."

"Of course he's not dead. What do you think this is, an episode of Fullmetal Alchemist?" Xaldin waved him off casually.

"Ouch. Did you just go there?" Lexaeus marveled.

"I rather think I did."

"Well, you're right. He can surely take care of himself," Lexaeus sighed. "This world is..."

"Annoying, mostly, but nothing too horribly treacherous. Yet," Xaldin finished the sentence for him. "I just spent the last half an hour being molested and worshipped by a swarm of overzealous cartoon characters."

"Hmm," Lexaeus did not sound impressed for some reason. "I would trade places with you happily."

"Why's that?"

"I just spent the last half an hour running from *them*," Lexaeus motioned over his shoulder to the hill just beyond the road, where a veritable army of anime characters were surging after him, weapons raised overhead and malice and misplaced righteousness in their eyes. Like the Scottish armies of William Wallace they came tearing over the hillside, screaming at the top of their lungs, waving arms overhead and occasionally chibifying just to lower the guard of their intended target.

"**Damn**," Xaldin's jaw dropped.

"They're persistent," Lexaeus motioned for Xaldin to join him in a brisk run in the opposite direction. "They're each and every one of them convinced I ought to be stealing their precious artifacts or otherwise mucking up their lives, exactly as an episode of their usual adventures would go."

"Mmph," Xaldin rolled his eyes as they ran. "I suppose we shouldn't have expected

too much from Fandom Hearts."

"Can't they at least come up with a few original ideas? Honestly, I ran into ten or twenty copies of *the same characters* just in the span of a few minutes," Lexaeus groaned.

"A shame," Xaldin agreed, "But onto more important things—we've got to find Vexen, and then I've got two Seme signals coming in."

"Two of them?" Lexaeus's lip curled in distaste. "From what direction?"

"North," Xaldin replied.

"There's supposedly a castle up north. I was going to head there if I failed to find either you or Vexen," Lexaeus reasoned.

"Yes... and the Toons mentioned a pair of evil overlord ruling the world from a castle in the north," Xaldin added. "I think it's a safe bet that these evil overlords are little more than the lost... you know of our comrades, manifested into creepy pseudo-beings and on a quest for universal domination."

"It just sounds stranger and stranger the more times we hear the whole story," Lexaeus sighed heavily.

"Look on the bright side. It will make a hilarious anecdote next Dies Natalis Solis Invicti barbecue," Xaldin shrugged.

By now, you are all probably wondering what, indeed, happened to Vexen.

It's a rather long and funny story, unless, of course, you happen to be Vexen himself. In which case it is not funny in the least, and anybody who laughs at it is a sadistic asshole and will someday die by Vexen's very hands. Read the following recap with caution.

Vexen, due to some freakish twist of physics perhaps caused by the length of his lovely hair, was hurled off in a separate direction from his colleagues mid-crash. He landed far to the north of both of them, right in the middle of a vast canyon housing a familiar castle normally seen in Scotland.

When Vexen awoke, he was in the middle of some type of athletic field crowded

around by a sea of British private schoolchildren dressed in gaudily colored robes. Several of them looked oddly-out of place from how you would usually picture this particular group of British private schoolchildren—silver and gravity-defying brown-spiked hair was not a usual occurrence in the British private school we know of from our universe.

Vexen knew something was really out of the ordinary when the students all insisted he was a professor, and begged him to get back to the dungeon to teach them potions.

He'd *heard* about *these* people.

Fleeing and getting the hell out of the canyon as fast as his legs and teleportation powers could carry him, he found himself lost in a vast wasteland full of the fragments of shattered and forgotten worlds, forcibly implemented into Inept Crossings by the evil overlords to the north.

After what seemed like hours upon hours of encountering Care Bears, more whiny and hapless teenagers than Destiny Whatever High School could ever hope to house, obnoxious children wielding electric rats and card games and fighting tops and *digital* electric rats and phantasmal powers and magical planet powers and dinosaur fairies and magic sketchbooks and any number of silly things, Dean Koontz novels, Broadway musicals, television gourmet chefs, television lawyer shows, reality shows, CSI: Miami, fast food advertisement personalities, terrifying crack monsters with televisions in their stomachs, terrifying crack monsters with beady eyes and no mouths and hypnotic brainwashing dances, pop singers, boy bands, pop singers who solved mysteries, boy bands who solved mysteries, rappers, rappers who solved mysteries about pop singers and boy bands, and Lindsay Lohan, Vexen collapsed from exhaustion in the middle of nowhere, praying to any merciful deity of the Nobodies or any kind of merciful deity at all for the sweet deliverance of sudden death.

Fortunately for Vexen (though against his immediate wishes), he was rescued a short time later.

Unfortunately for Vexen, his rescuers were a squad of short, squatty, hunchbacked Gutless in threadbare potato sacks and they carried him immediately to the Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee.

This is where we finally catch up to our poor, abused Number Four, as he was

bound by chains to the wall of the dungeon in the very bottom floor of the castle, plotting some way to escape and also thirsting for the blood of the sick author who'd put him through such hell.

The trek across the wastelands had cost him most of his patience, as well as most of his energy—keeping himself cool had become a priority, particularly as he was dressed in a floor-length black leather coat in the middle of a sun beaten desert. This left him with little more than his intellect to help him in his escape plot. Once he regained his strength he could muster the strength to teleport.

But these were the Gutless he was dealing with, and despite a proven immunity to their most blatant effects, Vexen didn't want to find out what might happen if the Gutless used other methods of persuasion on him.

Unfortunately for Vexen, Secks and Luxory entered the room with no shortage of panache, and he realized with a sinking feeling he was probably going to find out.

"Good evening, my esteemed guest," Secks bowed gracefully.

"SUP!" Luxory added.

"If you're hoping to convert me into one of your spineless, shrieking, sobbing little Ukes, you've got another thing coming," Vexen snapped viciously. "Your little parasite won't work on me!"

"Ah yes, I know, I know, we've heard," Secks said moodily, tossing his head and sending his silver-blue hair all about in a dramatic rush. "The Superior and the Grand Master Fangirl have sent us a warning... and so we have prepared other methods of dealing with you and your... friends."

Vexen set his jaw firmly, clenching his teeth. It was the first thing you learned in Organization school- "Be Prepared". And whatever they had in store for him had to be less painful than accidentally wandering into the remains of a world set in The OC.

"Luxory," Secks whispered, eyes set on Vexen and burning with hungry resolve, "Please prepare... the UKENATOR."

"Righty-ho mah Lycan bro," Luxory tossed a few more not-gang signs (this time, the middle finger, the horns and sign language for "I love you") and meandered over to a nasty-looking switch on the wall, hooked up to a tremendous machine hanging from the ceiling. UKENATOR 3K was written on the sides in big block letters.

"*Really*, Luxory, can't you try using the phrase I taught you the other day?" Secks pouted slightly.

"HUUWHAT!"

"You *know*..." Secks insisted with a short wave of his hands. "'Yes, master'?"

"Y'ALL BEST BE GETTIN' UP ON OUTTA MAH GRILL, YO!" Luxory thrust his head right and left so abruptly it almost looked like he'd tip over in his Kickin' Shoes.

"Fine, fine... it was worth a try," Secks snapped.

"What are you going to do to me?" Vexen asked icily.

"Well it's simple, really... we can't *force* your... you know out of your body to join us in the bonds of Seme Brotherhood," Secks oozed, leaning close and toying with a strand of Vexen's hair around his finger. "But with this machine, perhaps we can... persuade you a little bit."

"Ain't many 'dem foo' dogs livin' roun' HEEEEAAAAH's zat can handle da UKENATOR!" Luxory yelled. "WOOT WOOT! YEEEEAAAYUH!"

There was a pause.

Vexen blinked. "... *what*?"

"Here," Secks said quietly.

"No, no," Vexen shook his head. "The whole... sentence, I... I really don't think that thing is speaking any reasonably widespread variation on the English language. It's like southern... hillbilly... French... gangster."

"HUUWHAT?"

"Luxory, please," Secks rolled his eyes. "You're interrupting my evil speech. Yes... now, Number Four, be prepared for the most intense pain you have ever felt. Your... you know will be throbbing with agony when we flip that switch. If you have any self-preservation instinct in that heartless body of yours, you will be *begging* to become one of us, if it will only stop the pain. It is the *greatest* suffering."

"I've seen the Harmonians," Vexen replied coldly. "I'm not afraid of anything you

can do. And mark my words, **Saïx**... when I get out of these chains, I'm going to *personally* kill you."

"Don't call me by my slave name," Secks grinned and motioned for Luxory to flip the switch.

The machine's rotors began to spin. The room filled with crackling electricity, flickering lights, bright colors and the tingling hum of loud chords, loud enough for the unfortunate victims of the UKENATOR to feel the vibrations in their very chests.

"Yes... it hurts, doesn't it?" Secks cackled hysterically.

"You've got to be *kidding* me," Vexen laughed, equally amused.

"HUUWHAT!" Luxory gaped.

Secks's jaw dropped and he glared at Vexen in disbelief. "Why aren't you screaming! This is pain that has made greater men than you bleed out of their eyeballs!"

"It's A Small World After All?" Vexen huffed. "Don't make me *laugh*. I'm half Disney, you fool, that song won't have any effect on me."

"It's a world of laughter, a world of tears! It's a world of love and a world of fears-"

"Very well," Secks snapped. "I can see you are a formidable opponent, Chilly Academic. Luxory!"

"YEEEAYUH!"

"Change it to Setting B."

The record scratched out and Luxory's expression dropped into utter horror. "HUUWHAT! Not... not Settin' B, Homeslice! We ain't never had to subject no foo' t' Settin' B!"

"Well it's time," Secks replied, stuffing a large amount of cotton in his ears.

"What's... Setting B?" Vexen's lip twitched.

"It is the Ultimate Suffering," Secks made sure to pronounce the capital letters.

Off on the other side of the dungeon, Luxory was hastily pulling on a pair of blinged-out safety earmuffs, turning the dial to block out all sound as he opened the locked glass case for the UKENATOR 3K's Setting B.

Vexen tightened his fists so hard he could have squeezed sweat from his gloves, bracing himself back against the dungeon wall and taking deep breaths. Mind over matter, he reminded himself. It was mind over matter. Be Prepared. He mustn't show weakness. Xaldin and Lexaeus would be here to get him out soon enough, he just had to survive until then.

"It's been nice knowing you, Number Four," Secks said wickedly. "Pull the switch, Luxory!"

"YEEEEAYUH!" Luxory threw the switch to implement Setting B.

At first there was silence.

But then the room filled with the most high, shrill, irritating and entirely horrific sound ever heard by human, Heartless or Nobody kind, a sound that drove all its victims madly, screamingly, killingly insane, a sound that was second only to Paris Hilton's new single in the rankings of "Most Sadistic Sounds Ever Produced on the Audible Wavelength".

"It's a piece of cake to make a pretty cake!

If the way is hazy!

You gotta do the cookin' by the book!

You know you can't be lazy!

Never use a messy recipe!

The cake will end up-"

Any further lyrics were obscured by Vexen's bloodcurdling screams of torture...

... screams that echoed for miles, screams that reached the ears of two Nobodies emerging from their portals just outside Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee.

"Xaldin- Xaldin, listen... do you hear that?" Lexaeus put a hand on his comrade's shoulder to stop his charge.

"Yes... what is it?" Xaldin clenched his teeth—whatever it was, he didn't like it.

Lexaeus's eyes narrowed furiously. "That's Vexen. And that is the sound of the Ultimate Suffering."

Paris Hilton's new single differs from The Lazytown Cake Song in that it causes instantaneous hemorrhage and death in any poor sap unlucky enough to be exposed to the sound waves. It is the only audio arrangement known to man that actually seeks out prey. They say if a radio playing Paris Hilton's new single sounds in the forest, and there's no one around to hear it, an angel bursts into flames and falls out of the sky.

The best part is how none of you believe me that it's really *that bad*.

This chapter, instead of my usual author's note, I present a note from my beautiful beta, Organization VI's very own Seductive Viper, Gext:

"I, in my rareified ivory tower, was heretofore unaware of this Lazytown amusement so beloved, I was told, by the peasantry.

In my zeal to aid fellow authors, I of course researched the topic before providing gracious advice, and thus came across this cake song. I am sure that among you, dear audience, there are some benighted individuals who do not know of this song and will feel compelled to look it up, as I did. Please, do so! I extend to you, comrade, the Hand of Friendly Camaraderie.

I hope you will pardon the fact that it is a left hand, as my right (the Hand of Devious Plotting) is currently muffling my cruelly delighted cackles. I bid you as fond a farewell as I am capable of doing, and hope you enjoy this work of fiction."

Well I don't really think I can beat that one.

As always, review or flame as you see fit and I will cherish your opinion like a cuddly kitten. See you next chapter! YEEEEAAAYUH!

Came Out of a Crazy Mind

CHAPTER SEVEN: Came Out of a Crazy Mind

Just past the rusted, sharpened iron gates of Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee, bordering the winding brick road up to the great drawbridge and front gates, there was a vast and macabre garden. Stems of dead flowers raised the shriveled blossoms into the light of the full moon, like the gristly hands of a corpse reaching out from the grave. Moonlight poured from the silvery orb up above, perfectly round as it always was in this little corner of Inept Crossings—a requiem for the eternal day that had never been born, cloaked in the shadow of the eternal night. Gothic statues stood like monoliths in the deeper sections of the garden, gargoyles and lawn gnomes almost seeming to move in the absence of sunlight. Foreboding bushes lined the path, expertly trimmed into the shapes of Dracula, Lestat, Vlad the Impaler, every film role of Kate Beckinsale up to but not including *Click*, that girly Dracula from Castlevania, Alucard, Vampire Hunter D, Bela Lugosi and Bunnacula.

At the far end of the path was a particularly proud-looking bush, trimmed into the elegant figure of a very familiar being in a long robe doing his very best to look like he belonged on the cover of a gothic horror novel.

"I don't know why the moon didn't tip me off earlier that Saïx's Seme had a part in this," Xaldin rolled his eyes at the bush's likeness.

"He and Luxord's Seme must be working together here. They must be responsible for the horrid shape this world is in," Lexaeus sighed.

"I couldn't care less about this revolting little piece of nowhere," Xaldin replied, "But I would like our Organization members back as soon as possible."

"All three of them," Lexaeus added.

Neither would acknowledge the fact, but the screams of torture echoing from the direction of the castle had been silenced. There was an apparent mutual dread to find out why that was.

A wolf howled in the distance and suddenly there were footsteps—shuffling, stuttering footsteps coming down the stone path in a slow march towards the two Nobodies.

"We have company," Xaldin warned his comrade, drawing a lance up out of the air. Lexaeus nodded silently and called for his tomahawk, moving back-to-back against Xaldin to keep an eye out in a full circle around them.

"AH-NEE-MAY!" moaned a croaky voice. "AH-NEE-MAAAAAY!"

"AH-NEE-MAY! AH-NEE-MAY!" a whole chorus of croaky voices answered.

"Oh hell," Lexaeus groaned, as they were suddenly set upon by a small mob of pasty, red-eyed anime fans.

Well, this particular mob was made up of a species called Otaku Gutless, so they were considerably more pasty and red-eyed than most anime fans. They wore cat ears, Naruto headbands, tattered and stained shirts with kanji for "I want a Japanese girl/boyfriend" emblazoned across the fronts, blue jeans and Pikachu slippers. They carried boxes of pocky in greasy fingers and bottles of pressurized ramune hung from their belts, refreshments that could never feed the hunger for all things Japanese that radiated from their dead, glazed-over eyes. The Gutless symbol was tattooed proudly on their cheeks.

The Gutless in the back began to arm themselves with bootleg Hong Kong subtitled DVDs while those in the front continued their undead march towards our heroes, their arms out and their fingers itching to strangle some gaijin.

"They never seem to be anything more than cannon fodder nuisances," Xaldin lamented, impaling a whole group of the creatures nearest him on the ends of his six lances.

"No, it makes one wonder when we'll ever have to deal with a real challenge," Lexaeus agreed, decapitating those on his side.

The wounded Gutless stumbled on the ground after the dealing of their death-blows, but much to the chagrin of our heroes began to slowly lift themselves up as though only given flesh wounds.

"Why won't they *die*?" Xaldin snapped after his fourth or fifth attempt to kill a particularly stubborn group.

"This species must have gained ridiculously unrealistic stamina and recovery abilities, not unlike the majority of manga characters," Lexaeus suggested reasonably.

Unfortunately for Lexaeus, he was suddenly set upon by a snarling gang of the creatures, squeezing and poking and pulling at him in outraged fury at his callous mispronunciation.

"MAHN-GA! *MAAAAHN-GA!*" moaned the Gutless.

The Silent Hero was quite a large man, but it was difficult to effortlessly shrug off the spaghetti-armed dorks when there were so many of them glomping all over his legs, arms and back. "Xaldin, a little help?"

"Obnoxious little bastards!" Xaldin roared, becoming quite frustrated as he attempted to free his comrade from the onslaught. Headless, crawling Gutless began to yank on his coat like bloodthirsty zombies, scrawny hands feeling about in his pockets for any sign of a wallet, the only thing that could keep up the crack-like expenses of their favorite hobby. "Back OFF! We don't have any of your accursed cartoons!"

A banshee-like shriek sounded in unison from their meek throats, a very insulted scream of "AH-NEE-MAY! **AH-NEEEEE-MAAAAY!**"

"I think we pissed them off," Lexaeus grunted, thrusting his shoulders left and right and trying to swing his tomahawk, but barely able to move for the unmoving mass of geek currently clinging to him.

"Son of a bitch!" Xaldin was not normally the type to curse when the going got tough, but now the little monsters were grabbing handfuls of his braids and yanking him downward to join their writhing cesspool of nerdiness on the ground. "They're stupider than anybody who thinks Naruto is an accurate depiction of ninjitsu!"

"Did you just go there?" Lexaeus managed a grin.

Xaldin smirked despite himself. "I rather think I did."

"NAH-RU-TOH! **NAAAH-RU-TOOOOH!**" screamed the Gutless.

"NUH-RU-DOH!" a solitary Gutless in the back added. The unfortunate little chap was immediately set upon by his own kind, who ripped him limb from limb.

Xaldin and Lexaeus stared at the grisly scene for only a second or two before the answer came to them.

"Lexaeus—answer me a question," Xaldin said quickly. "What would *Aeris* do in

this situation?"

"I'm not sure—I've always subscribed to the philosophy of *Luffy*," Lexaeus replied without missing a beat.

The Otaku Gutless all gasped in simultaneous horror.

"AERITH!" screamed half.

"LOO-FEE!" screamed the other half.

The screaming was met by more gasps of horror.

"AERIS!"

"LUHFF-EE!"

"How about *Yuffie*?" Xaldin interrupted the screaming match.

"Oh no, I'd be more concerned about keeping my head in a more *Tidus*-like fashion," Lexaeus added.

"YOO-FFEE!" shrilled the incensed Gutless.

"TAI-DUS!"

"YUH-FFEE!"

"TEE-DUH!"

"The real question is what *Vincent* would do," Xaldin tossed out a little unnecessarily, as the Otaku Gutless were already busy screaming and bitching and choking each other over pronunciations.

"BINSENTO!" one rather zealous little fellow in the back yelled and pile-drove a few of his mates.

The Gutless slowly began to fall away from Xaldin and Lexaeus, turning instead to the very important task of correcting each other over the pronunciation of the names of fictional characters. When neither side of any particular argument would back down, there came the slaps, the pokes, the pushes and shoves, the foot-stomping, the biting, the clawing, the ripping and the dismembering.

The two Nobodies stumbled back a safe distance away and watched the scuffle, recovering their strength with big, evil smiles on their faces.

"Oh, it's a beautiful thing," Xaldin sighed with a satisfied smirk.

"Makes me wish I'd watched a little more *Evangelion*, wouldn't you agree, Xaldin?" Lexaeus said loudly.

That was the last straw. In a great explosion of noise, the Otaku Gutless gave their final screams of self-righteous trivial nonsense (some combination of "EHV-AN-JEL-EE-ON!", "EEV-AN-GEHL-EE-ON" and a few random Japanese curses from the ones who were too incensed and upset to even argue). Then the whole mob of them exploded in a magnificent burst of cherry blossoms, sweatdrops and comical nose blood, leaving nothing behind but smears and half-emptied boxes of coconut almond pocky.

"Handled with delightful cleverness as always, Lexaeus," Xaldin extended his palm.

"I only wish Vexen was here to see it," Lexaeus replied, shaking his hand.

"We oughtn't waste anymore time—let's get inside this place and rescue our unfortunate comrades," Xaldin motioned over his shoulder.

"Too right," Lexaeus agreed, and the two of them rushed up the path and through the castle's front door.

If there was one thing Secks was good at, it was brooding. He had a vast *repertoire* of skills, but brooding happened to be one of his specialties.

He was currently staring out the *theatre* window of his *chambre* in the highest *centre* tower of the castle, gazing ceaselessly at the full moon with a dark gleam in his eyes. It was almost dark enough to rival that redundantly dark guy from the first part of chapter six.

Ah, but it paled in comparison to the moon, that beautiful *spectre* in the sky. Its silvery light glinted off the dark *fibres* on the trim of his robes and the *sabres* displayed on the walls behind him. It was such a beautiful night. He felt good. Perhaps later he and Luxory would go outside and *grille* some beer can chicken.

Suddenly, his pleasant thoughts of a nice midnight barbecue were interrupted by a pair of semi-familiar scents catching in his nose.

Secks inhaled, sniffing. His eyes narrowed. He clenched his teeth together and suddenly the moon was a very unpleasant thing. It was calling to him, chanting his name, trying to edge him away from what was fine and upright and comfortable and admirable and towards the truth...

"Nobodies," Secks snarled to himself, tightening fists so hard his already pale knuckled turned bone-white.

He turned dramatically from the window, his cape whooshing behind him as he stomped towards the *chambre* door.

They would have to be dealt with *immediatele*.

Following the guidebook's signal and fighting off hoards of Otaku Gutless by starting amusing fights about stupid things, Xaldin and Lexaeus were able to quickly navigate the hallways of Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee until they reached the long, dank stairs down into the dungeons, where there were a few weak unidentified signals flashing for attention.

"Do you suppose he's all right?" Lexaeus asked softly as they reached a doorway at the bottom of the stairs.

"I don't know... we three are supposedly immune to the Gutless parasite, but if they've done something else to him..." Xaldin drifted off.

"If they have, we'll deal with it like we've dealt with the others," Lexaeus replied. "Simple as that."

He placed a hand on the doorknob and slowly turned it, pushing the pair's way into the dungeons.

It was eerily silent in the cavernous main room of the dungeon. All sorts of nasty-looking machines of torture and other unknown purposes hung from the walls, a fairly impressive one hanging from the ceiling above. At the far end of the room was a slab with some body covered by a stained white sheet.

And nearby, chained to the wall and passed out, was Vexen.

He was obviously not dead, his comrades noted as they rushed across the room to his aid—Nobodies did not leave bodies behind when they died, but simply faded away into the darkness from whence they came. Whatever happened to him, Vexen was still alive...

But in quite a state. He was bedraggled, exhausted-looking, and paler than the vocal comparison of Paul Rodgers to Freddie Mercury. His hair rested stringy and dirty over his shoulders and his eyes were closed as though he was merely sleeping. He was unresponsive as Lexaeus stood beside him and attempted to wake him.

"Vexen! Vexen! Wake up! Are you all right?" Lexaeus hissed, shaking him by the shoulders.

For all intents and purposes Vexen appeared to be quite dead, barely breathing—though healthily pulseless.

"What in the hell did they do to him?" Lexaeus asked in a rising tone, as Xaldin poked around the equipment on the walls.

"I don't know," Xaldin glared at the complex machinery and devices like they had personally insulted him in hiding their purposes. He turned his attention to the slab and the still body a short distance away, staring back and forth between Vexen and the figure obscured by the sheet.

"Vexen! Number Four! Vexen!" Lexaeus said loudly in his ear. "*Even!*"

Suddenly Vexen began to stir, groaning heavily and letting one of his eyes slide wearily open.

"There, he's awake," Lexaeus sighed with slight relief.

"Vexen, what happened?" Xaldin asked him, hurrying over to assess his condition.

Vexen didn't reply for a moment, still seeming to be gathering his wits. He moaned a few short, high-pitched nonsense syllables and stared sleepily at his rescuers, tilting his head ever-so-slightly to the side.

"Are you all right? Say something," Xaldin urged him.

"Ngggpppggnhmggghggm?" he said eloquently.

"There now, calm down," Lexaeus gave him a few steady pats on the shoulder.

"Take a moment to collect yourself."

Vexen very slowly opened his other eye, squinting in the bright light of the room and making confused faces at his comrades, as though working very hard to piece together what had happened to him. He weakly lifted his hands, chains jingling and banging against the wall as he tried to motion something with his hands. "Mmmph," he groaned. "Mmmmmph..."

"What is it?" Xaldin urged him.

Vexen began moving his lips very slowly, though no sound came out as he seemed to be mouthing something. He glanced back and forth from Xaldin to Lexaeus with fear in his eyes, mouthing faster and faster and seeming to shrink away in the horror of remembrance.

"Speak up, Vexen," Lexaeus pat him on the shoulder again. "It's all right, they won't hurt you anymore. We'll get you out. Just tell us what happened."

He finally began to mumble unintelligibly, the same syllables he'd been mouthing silently, eyes glazing over with traumatized fear.

"Pccktmkaprtycke..." Vexen whispered. "Fthwyszzy..."

"Vexen?" Xaldin raised an eyebrow.

"Speak up," Lexaeus encouraged him.

"You don't understand," Vexen's voice suddenly broke in a high-pitched moan. His chains jangled as he reached out, grabbed Lexaeus and Xaldin by the collars, and pulled them very close to him. *"You don't understand. Can't understand. Can't hear! Can't see can't speak or feel or know can't understand why... why... why..."*

"Calm down," Xaldin said sternly. "Just tell us what happened."

"Bits and pieces little bits and pieces of apple chunks coming up," Vexen's voice was tilting into a miserable wail. *"Running and walking on two legs dancing singing like a girl... not a girl, not a girl, a monster... grotesque plastic faces smiling and laughing and moving like it's natural but it's not natural right and left and back and forth and up and down... can't speak can't hear can't feel or know don't understand why... why! **Why!**"*

Xaldin and Lexaeus stared at their comrade in horror as the events of the past few

hours began to come together.

"*By the book by the book by the book by the book by the book,*" Vexen's voice rose into a helpless scream. "BY THE BOOK! BY THE BOOK!"

"Vexen...?" they mumbled together.

His eyes got very small and his mouth opened very wide in a shriek of pure terror. "YOU GOTTA DO THE COOKIN' BY THE BOOK! By the book... by the book, oh merciful worlds, not the cake... *not the cake... They wouldn't stop...* hours... minutes fading into hours of it... the cake... i-it's the cake... THE CAKE!"

The other Nobodies quickly broke themselves out of Vexen's grip and backed away as fast as they could, eyes wide in shock and terror.

Organization XIII was not a nice group of sort-of-kind-of-former people. They toyed with minds, they twisted relationships, they used lives as tools, they manipulated innocents, they spread chaos, they captured hearts, they lengthened the lines at the DMV and they commanded Heartless. They caused destruction and mayhem, they were amoral and didn't care about the consequences, they used any means to achieve their ends.

But no member of Organization XIII, no matter how desperate, no matter how mean, no matter how evil and no matter how determined to find a heart, would ever—**ever**—do something like this to any being, human, Heartless and Nobody alike.

"Those bastards... those sick, twisted sons of bitches!" Xaldin growled.

"This will not stand," Lexaeus glowered. "They **will** **pay**."

"*Will they?*" a cool, evil voice whispered from behind them.

Suddenly Xaldin and Lexaeus were thrown forward by a burst of ice and sleet. They skidded to a halt just short of slamming the poor delusional Vexen into the wall and turned around in time for a very climactic lightning strike and thunder clap, announcing the presence of someone new.

The body on the slab slowly rose up, unnaturally loose and dragging limbs like a rag doll. A pale hand yanked away the sheet and—

"YEEEEEEEEEEHAAAAAWWW! Y'ALL BOYS IS ALL KINDA EXCITIN' T' BE

MEETIN' FOR TH' FIRST TIME!"

It was fair to say that this *was* the first time anybody had seen Vexen (or at least, somebody who looked just like him) in a sweat-stained trucker cap. His red flannel shirt was tucked into ripped and greasy blue jeans, the pantlegs similarly tucked into a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots and held up by a pair of camouflage suspenders. The creature on the table snorted loudly, hocked a massive loogie off to the side and grinned like an idiot with shiny white buck teeth.

The Vexen-thing spun on the seat of his pants and hopped to his feet, adjusting his ball cap and hitching his thumbs in his pants.

"HOOOOOEEEEYYY! HOWDY Y'ALL!" he more or less hollered. "VIXEN'S mah name! Awful pleasure t' be meetin' y'all!"

Xaldin and Lexaeus stared silently at the Seme, then over at Vexen, staring in abject horror at the creature that had risen from the slab.

*"Oh no no no no no no no no no **NO**,"* Vexen mumbled.

"What was it Vexen said we were to do if he ever got turned?" Xaldin asked.

"He said to give him twenty minutes and if he wasn't back to normal, kill him," Lexaeus replied.

"Am I alone in thinking it would be a mercy killing if we put him out of his misery now?"

"No. No, Xaldin, I think Vexen would appreciate it if we saved him a little dignity and killed him immediately."

"But he did say twenty minutes," Xaldin lamented—if it were him, he would certainly want to be dead.

"Let's see if we can't defuse the situation before then," Lexaeus said grimly.

"Awww shyoooooot!" Vixen giggled lecherously, grinning like he'd just won free tickets to a Toby Keith concert. "Y'all ain't gonna be gettin' rid'a me so soon now, are ya? I been waitin' t' deal y'all a hand'a TEXAS DEATH HOLD 'EM!"

"HUWHAAT?"

The sudden shine of bling across the room announced the presence of Homie X Luxury, posing melodramatically at the top of the stairway. He spun his pimp cane and grinned, showing off a mouthful of sparkly gold teeth. "Now Luxury knows y'all ain't makin' plans f'r card games 'round HEAH wit'out 'im, EH? EH?"

"HOWDY 'CUZ!" Vixen greeted his Seme brethren with a mighty helpin' o' Southern friendliness, waving and tipping his hat. "Y'all wanna come on down an' help me take these fellers out?"

"AW HELL NAW!" Luxury burst out. "Homeslice's all 'Yo Luxury we's gonna turn all three'o'dem peeps t' our side, an' we gets us some favas from the Sups', ya dig?"

"Hear ya loud n' clear, buddy!" Vixen danced a little excited jig. "An' after that can we go find us a honky-tonk?"

"HUUWHAAT? Aw MAN y'all's all into that country shit, BOYEEE?"

"Dern skippy, 'Cuz! Let's GIT R DUN!"

"HUUWHAAT?"

"GIT R DUN!"

"YEEAAYUH!"

"I didn't understand a *word* of that," Xaldin said, shaking his head in utter disbelief.

"I'm almost glad Vexen isn't in any condition to witness this," Lexaeus said optimistically.

"In any case, he and the English language have suffered enough," Xaldin summoned all six of his lances and began to hover a few feet off the ground. "I don't know how much more of this I can stand. Let's get it over with."

"We're down to seventeen minutes before we should kill Vexen," Lexaeus caught his tomahawk as it appeared in thin air before him, hefting it over his shoulder.

"Once again, we can *clearly* see the importance of having a living will that your friends and family know about," Xaldin said off-handedly to the readers.

"I know I will make it a priority as soon as possible... you never know what can

happen," Lexaeus agreed, nodding sagely.

"You take Luxord's, I'll take Vexen's?" Xaldin suggested.

"Sounds good to me," Lexaeus nodded and treaded across the room to face his opponent.

With a smug grin, Luxory kicked a switch on the floor nearby as Lexaeus approached. A hip-hop rhythm filled the room through the extra large speakers, and he twirled around in circles before striking another dramatic pose. "Yo-yo big guy, 'SUP? Now y'all gonna watch n' learn cuz HOMIE X LUXORY- he got Skillz That Killz, a'ight?"

"Okay," Lexaeus did not look very impressed as Luxory launched into a snazzy four-minute hip-hop crunk and breakdancing demo, a fairly disconcerting sight for anybody who knew the British gentleman from his Nobody life.

But suddenly the music began to speed up. Luxory stood straight and snapped his fingers in time to the beat. He grinned at Lexaeus evilly and a dark glow came about him.

Lexaeus tightened his fists around his tomahawk, bracing himself for Luxory's inevitable first attack. He watched closely as the Seme reached into his pocket and pulled out four flashy holographic-backed playing cards, carefully studying the numbers and the suits before throwing them up in the air.

This was going to be difficult.

Let it be known that though Luxord was the only member of Organization XIII without a real, threatening weapon, there wasn't one among their number who would ever doubt how dangerous and skillful a fighter he was (this does not include Zexion who as far as we know, wields nothing—and you are all very well aware of just how intimidating "nothing" can be). New recruits and cocky challengers always laughed when they found out that "all" Luxord could do is play games and make wagers. Luxord always took it in stride, simply smiling and then challenging the offender to a little game of cards or dice.

This more often than not resulted in humiliated, naked and penniless offenders begging and pleading for Luxord to stop collecting the "stakes" as he saw fit.

Number Ten was single-handedly responsible for the end of the Organization's weekly Game Night, after the great Monopoly Incident of several years ago. The

man is named after a *casino*, for cryin' out loud.

So when Luxory's cards began to swirl around him faster and faster, more illusory cards gathering behind him and spinning in preparation to strike, one cannot blame Lexaeus for hedging his own bets the way he did.

"Y'all gonna be prayin' to yo mamma fo' mercy up in HEAH!" Luxory cackled maniacally. "Y'all can't stop the HIP-HOP!"

"Yes, I can," Lexaeus extended his hand and began to concentrate.

"YEAAAYUH? How y'all thinkin'?" Luxory snorted condescendingly.

"With rock," Lexaeus replied as Luxory was suddenly slammed to the ground and entombed in six cubic walls of thick stone. "Let's see you dig out of *there* with your pimp cane and playing cards."

Meanwhile, Xaldin was clashing with the horrifyingly out-of-character Vexen Seme, backing away briefly from the Whirlwind Lancer and wiggling his fingers. "Y'all're pretty tough, partner! I'm'onna make you squeal like a piggy," Vixen giggled.

"I'll go easy on you if you just promise to never, *ever* say that again," Xaldin groaned in disgust.

"Now why y'all goin' all off'n tryin' t' kill me now?" Vixen asked with a twisted grin. "Y'all know I'm havin' FUN over here on off by mahself an' away from *that*!" He gestured back over to the real Vexen, who had fallen silent and was watching the proceedings with a blank expression.

"We both know you're not going to be here very long," Xaldin grasped two of his lances in each hand while the other two spun around him protectively. "Let's just get it over with."

"Ah-HUH!"

"I said, 'Let's just get it over with'," Xaldin repeated.

"Ah-HUH!" this was accompanied by a sudden, spastic jerk of Vixen's head.

"Are you listening to me?" Xaldin snapped.

"Ah-HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH!" There was something clearly wrong with Vixen as his head continued to jerk and his limbs twitched convulsively. "YEEHAW! YEEHAW! YEEHAW! P-p-p-p-p-p-partner!"

"That is NOT me," Vexen yelled desperately.

"I know, Vexen, just stay there and stay calm. I'll deal with him," Xaldin replied as he and Vixen circled each other, the latter still jerking like a Final Fantasy fanboy in line at the Advent Children premiere.

Did I just go there? I rather think I did.

"No... I mean, that is **not** me!" Vexen repeated, still dazed, but doing his best to make sense and gesture with his chained hands. "Not my Seme!"

"It's *what*?" Xaldin whipped his head around to glance at his comrade in shock.

"Behind you!"

Xaldin lurched forward suddenly as Vixen tackled him, wrapping his arms around the lancer's neck and squeezing his throat. "YEEEEHAW! RIDE 'EM COWBOY!"

Screaming in rage, Xaldin swung an elbow back to knock the whatever-it-was off of him, spinning and lunging to dislodge the evil redneck Vexen from his person. Finally he managed to get an arm around the thing's neck, pulling its head forward for a nice gentlemanly meeting with Xaldin's fist.

Xaldin figured something was very wrong when the front of Vixen's face impacted. "What *the hell*!"

"YA GOL' DARN GONE AN' DUNNIT!" Vixen fell to the ground and continued to spasm, sparks popping from his joints and smoke pouring from his eyed, mouth and nose. "I GOT FRIENDS IN LOOOOOOOW PLACES!" Layers of skin, hair and clothes purchased from an Army Surplus store began to crumble and melt away from a metallic frame.

"Merciful darkness," Xaldin cursed, backing away from the malfunctioning Vixen and grasping at his throat. "It's not a Seme, it's a Replica!"

"*Kill it!*" Vexen snapped from his spot on the wall, apparently feeling more like his old, cranky self.

Never the type to ask questions or debate when the options came down to killing or being molested by a creepy replica of a friend of his (which happened fairly often, surprisingly), Xaldin gestured with his hands and a rain of four lances fell from nowhere, impaling the Vexen Replica to the hard stone floor in a great shower of sparks and motor oil.

Once everything quieted down, Xaldin recalled his lances and let out an immense sigh. "Why didn't you say anything earlier, Vexen? We were ten minutes from putting you out of your misery!"

"If the two of you knew what they put me through before you got here," Vexen growled, looking quite a bit healthier than he had a few minutes earlier thanks to a Nobody's innate powers of recovery, "You wouldn't be so snappy with me."

"Something about cake?" Xaldin asked as Lexaeus made his way over to join them. Vexen shuddered visibly at the hated word.

"I've got Luxord's Seme trapped over there for the moment," Lexaeus informed them, "We can deal with him whenever we're ready. Good to see you feeling better, Vexen."

"I can speak coherently, at least," Vexen grumbled, "But I still feel as though I was hit by a train."

"At least your... you know are intact. But why would they bother making a Replica of you?" Xaldin wondered out loud, staring distastefully at what remained of Vixen.

"It's fuzzy," Vexen replied as Lexaeus got to work releasing him from his chains. "But I don't think their coercion methods to get a Seme out of me were working."

"Good show, Vexen," Lexaeus complimented him. "Very strong of you, to stand up in the face of such pure, absolute torture."

"Thank you," Vexen sighed, weary and exhausted. "I used up much of my power trying to withstand their experiments... I don't think I'll be up for any fights on this world."

"And we wouldn't ask it of you. Concentrate on regaining your strength, and Lexaeus and I will handle any more fighting that needs to be done," Xaldin assured him.

From up on the top of the stairway, there came the sound of a slow clap.

"Bravo... bravo, gentlemen. Very nice detective work," Secks smiled eerily at them as he appeared in all his gothic glory. "The Grand Master Fangirl and our Superior were very insistent that we find a way to incapacitate the three of you, but your dear friend we captured just didn't seem to want to cooperate."

"You!" Vexen snarled, freed from his chains just in time. "You sadistic bastard! You're going to **pay** for what you did to me!"

"Ah, Saïx!" Xaldin smiled with fake good-nature. "We thought it was you holed up in this horrible, drab little castle!"

"*Don't* call me by my slave name, Number Three," Secks threw back a predatory grin and brushed very shiny long blue hair from his face, eyes glittering in the dim light of the dungeon laboratory. "Wait."

He paused suddenly and placed a hand on his chin. "No, no, no, that won't do at all. What a terribly-timed entrance!"

"Pardon?" Lexaeus called up to him.

"I ought to have come in right after you mentioned the Replica," Secks snapped his fingers. "No, no, see, what did I say? About detective work! Agh! It'd sound so much more diabolical if I came in at the proper time... Now hold on a moment, I'm going to leave and come back and we'll try that again. Say something about the Replica!"

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus stared at him dumbly as he spun around and exited the dungeon again with a loud slam of the door.

"What in the name of...?" Vexen mumbled.

Xaldin eyed his two comrades much the way one eyes their very first encounter with mislabeled Pokemon tentacle hentai, and said, "*What* about the Replica?"

From up on the top of the stairway, there came the sound of a slow clap.

"Bravo... bravo, gentlemen. Very nice detective work," Secks smiled eerily at them as he appeared in all his gothic glory. "The Grand Master Fangirl and our Superior were very insistent that we find a way to incapacitate the three of you, but your dear friend we captured just didn't seem to want to cooperate."

He smiled suddenly, and laced his fingers together. "That was much better. *Perfect.*"

Ignoring the dumbstruck trio down below, Secks slowly mounted the stairs and continued drawling on in a light, sinister voice. "Yes... all we needed was to buy a little time from our dear Superiors until we could figure out how, precisely, to get our hands on those lovely you knows of yours... So my associate Luxory and I built a Replica until we could present our masters with a true Seme."

"No wonder it broke down so quickly," Lexaeus snapped, "With such shoddy, hurried construction."

"It is much better than you could have done, you dundering oaf!" Secks snapped, then paused again. "'Dundering'... hm... 'stumbling'? 'Plodding'? 'Traipsing'...? Ah, yes- It is much better than you could have done, you *traipsing* oaf!"

"As though it weren't enough you were the empty, brainless shell of one of our most loyal associates in Organization XIII," Xaldin yelled, pulling a lance out of midair for the ensuing combat. "You are also a ridiculous, elitist idiot and a sadistic torturer, whose evil is unfit to exist in even the deepest darkness!"

"As such," Lexaeus added, hoisting his tomahawk over his shoulder. "We're going to destroy you, and your associate."

"Ahahahahah!" Secks laughed maniacally, throwing his hands up to the sky as a window shade across the room dramatically flew open, pouring silver moonlight into the dungeon (despite the fact that the dungeon was underground). "You insignificant worms! Hm. 'Worms'...? No, no... maggots... maggots! You insignificant *maggots*! You fools *really* think you can defeat me? Me, Lord Secks, the castellan master of Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee? Overlord and ruler of all Inept Crossings? HAHAAHAHA!" He threw out his arms and his cape whipped in a sudden indoor wind behind him, dramatically accentuating the organ chords from nowhere. "Entire worlds have crumbled beneath my mighty wrath! And the three... no, the *two* of you think you can *possibly* defeat me?"

"In a word, yes," Lexaeus snapped, not taking Secks' snide comments about Vexen's inability to fight in a very light manner at all.

In actuality, Secks was referring to the fact that Vexen had vanished somewhere between his first and second dramatic entrances, so there were, in fact, only two Nobodies standing against him.

"Very well... allow me to show you just how hopelessly disillusioned you are," Secks sneered as he reached the bottom of the stairs, and crossed his arms over his chest in the manner of a corpse lying in the coffin. "Moonlight! Shine down upon me!"

Secks began to tremble and quiver, taking on a vaguely evil glow as the moonlight cascaded over his body. His eyes began to glitter blood red and he lurched as though undergoing some transformation.

"Oh, *wonderful*," Xaldin groaned.

"Let me guess. He's a *werewolf* in this world, isn't he?" Lexaeus added lamely.

"Either that or he's Sailor Moon," Xaldin quipped. "In which case all we need to defeat him is to call him by his dubbed name. He'll convulse and explode in a blind rage."

"Or we could insinuate that he's actually Luxory's cousin instead of his lover," Lexaeus smirked.

"Or we could simply wait until his androgynous sex-changing allies appear and they refuse to dub him in North America," Xaldin put in.

"And we most certainly went there," Lexaeus concluded with sarcastic smile.

Across the dungeon, Secks was fully in the throes of his transformation, growing claws, longer and silkier hair in a mane down his neck and back, and fangs. Adorable puppy ears sprang up from his head and once he had made it about halfway—that is, before he got *too* terribly ugly or beastly—the transformation ceased. He threw his cape off to the side and cleared his throat, emitting a loud and primal howl at the moon.

"Sssso you ssssse?" Secks snarled, as the last echoes of his howl dissipated through the room. "You forccccc me to reveal my TRUE SSSSELF! And now, I am going to DESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSTROY you!"

"Bring it on," Xaldin challenged him.

Secks' lovely hair fell in his face as he paced towards them slowly, dramatically, each step a testament to his badass evilness and his lycanthropic nature, eyed wide and teeth bared, lips pulled back into a gruesome snarl. "As I made your ridiculous old man comrade scream for mercy, I will make you scream when you are

writhing beneath me as I sup upon your blood and devour your still-beating heart from-

No sooner had the words escaped Secks' lips when there was the sound of electrical jolting from up above. The Seme and both Nobodies looked up quickly to see what was going on when a tremendous piece of scaffolding holding the UKENATOR 3000 snapped from its rivets and tumbled to the dungeon floor with a deafening crash. Xaldin and Lexaeus were able to teleport safely out of the way just in time, but Secks had barely managed to dodge, finding himself pinned as the scaffolding ground against the floor and barely missed impaling him, merely trapping him against another massive machine.

"First of all," an icy voice screamed from atop the fallen scaffolding, "I am neither *an old man*, nor am I *ridiculous*."

Secks grunted and squirmed, trying to escape from his predicament and growing just the slightest bit panicked as a dark figure drew closer and closer to him with something in his hands.

"Second," the voice continued, raising his hands and coating the scaffolding and floor with thick, twisting spires of ice that stuck Secks' arms, legs and torso to the wall, limiting his movement even further. "I *never* screamed for mercy from you, you sick, deluded bastard."

Secks glared in fury at the angry silhouette. "You releasssssse me thissss inssstant! I was not BORN to be CAGED-"

That's when Secks saw what Vexen was holding—and he fell completely silent, save for a pathetic puppy-like whimper from the back of his throat.

"And third," Vexen hissed, leaning inches away from Secks and staring him straight in the eye. "**Nobodies. Do not. Have. Hearts.**" He slipped a pair of rudimentary headphones over Secks' werewolf ears and took a few steps back towards the switch.

"Wh-wh-what are you doing!" Secks yelped. "You can't... n-no! No! You wouldn't!"

"I'm only keeping my promise, *Secks*," Vexen sneered. "I did say I'd kill you myself, didn't I?"

And with that, Vexen flipped the switch.

Silence filled the room.

Then came a dreadful noise. It was the sound of continued silence where there should have been screaming—but it was the silence that occurred when the victim was utterly incapable of screaming for one reason or another. Secks was incapable of screaming because his entire body had seized into convulsions—his eyes rolled back in his head, his mouth froze open and blood poured from his throat and the corners of his eyes.

Lexaeus and Xaldin appeared over Vexen's shoulder and glanced down in horror, just in time to watch Secks choke to death on his own vomit.

Then he exploded.

From the chunks came a burst of purple glowing sparkles, devolving to the shapeless purple blob the Seme had been born from and leaving a smear on the dungeon floor to mark where his body had been. Lexaeus very calmly opened the Tupperware and Saïx's you know drifted wispily in to join its comrades, almost serenely, as though it didn't remember at all what horrors the monster it had been was just subjected to.

Vexen, utterly calm, flipped the switch off.

"*What* in the name of any merciful Nobody deity was ***that***?" Xaldin demanded after a moment of silence.

"Payback," Vexen shrugged.

"No, I mean... ***what*** was that? I've never ***seen*** such a reaction!" Xaldin sputtered.

Vexen brushed his hair from his eyes, looking quite satisfied at his vengeance. "Paris Hilton's new single."

This was a side of Vexen that Xaldin had never observed before. He took a very small step away.

"Anyway," Vexen quickly changed the subject, "Let's finish off Luxord's Seme and get the hell out of here. I'm sick to death of this world."

"One problem there," Lexaeus called from where he was examining the stone chamber that had held Luxory.

"What?" Xaldin paced towards him, concern evident on his sideburns. "What happened?"

"He's escaped," Lexaeus said drolly, gesturing to the small hole in the side of the rock that appeared to have been dug by a pimp cane.

Homie X Luxory was not as all-out imposing as his late colleague Secks. He did not have the eerie atmosphere about him, he was not the lord of the castle (thanks to that one stupid coin flip) and he was never accompanied by thunderclaps or sultry moonlight or gargoyles statues.

He was not, however, stupid.

Upon escaping from his rocky predicament, Luxory had known good and well that his partner Secks was going to die. Luxory was an enterprising Seme, however, and knew that even if Castle Midnight Moonraven McGee fell to the wrath of the three Nobodies, he could still get away with some glory.

Unfortunately, sneaking out the back way while leaving his partner to suffer the most horrible death imaginable did not qualify one for glory, so Luxory was happy enough to settle for getting away with all the treasure from Secks' vaults.

He was currently zipping away from the castle as fast as he could in the G.S. Escalade, a tricked out model with spinning rims, vanity plates, pink and purple leopard-print interior upholstery, fuzzy dice in the window and a custom paint job with hot rod flames and bunnies. The extra spacious backseat of the gummi ship was filled to bursting with munny, valuables, jewels and gold, all stolen from the castle's treasure vault and previously stolen from the unfortunate residents of Inept Crossings.

"Yeeaaayuh," Luxory sighed dreamily, leaning far back in the driver's seat and blasting on some Ginuwine to relax as he made his getaway. He bobbed his head and set the cruise control and the hydraulics, and the ship drifted lazily through the sky on its way... well, he didn't know where, exactly. He just needed to find a new 'hood to haunt.

Cruising just over Toontown, Luxory glanced out the window at all the suckers down below. They'd hear about Secks soon enough, and he was sure they'd be really happy about it, too. That is, until they heard that Luxory was still around...

This wouldn't be too bad! He was the sole lord of the world now! Sucked to be Secks, but hey, may the best man survive, right?

"YEEEAYUH," Luxory agreed with his own thoughts.

Thoughts that were quickly interrupted by a shrill beeping noise.

"HUUUWHAT!" Luxory sat up and stared at the ship's monitor, flashing red and white obnoxiously over the CD player.

"WARNING. ENEMY SHIP DETECTED FROM THE REAR. EVASIVE ACTION SUGGESTED."

Luxory scrambled to take the ship back into normal mode, cursing quietly under his breath and glancing out the back to try and get a good view of his pursuers. The words "G.S. EXISTENTIALIST" were written in proud block script on the bow of the approaching gummi ship.

"Whudda foo' bros thinkin' they gonna chase Luxory gotta nudda fing comin', A'IGHT?"

"WARNING. ENEMY SHIP DETECTED FROM THE REAR. EVASIVE ACTION HIGHLY SUGGESTED."

"I'M WORKIN' ON IT!" Luxory yelled back to the computer.

"WARNING. ENEMY SHIP DETECTED FROM THE REAR. ENEMY WEAPONS CHARGING. I WOULD MOVE MY ASS OUT OF THE WAY IF I WAS YOU."

Struggling against the tight controls jerking around in the turbulent airflows, Luxory desperately thrashed right and left to get away from the sights of the ship behind him as the alarms blared louder and louder.

"WARNING. WARNING. ENEMY SHIP DETECTED FROM THE REAR. ENEMY GRAVITRON CANNON PREPARING TO FIRE. IMPACT IS ESTIMATED TO DESTROY THE SHIP. EVASIVE ACTION HIGHLY SUGGESTED- OTHERWISE PLEASE ASSUME THE SAFETY POSITION."

"HUUWHAT POSITION?" Luxory screeched at the computer.

The computer showed a helpful diagram of a stick figure man placing his head between his knees and kissing his butt goodbye.

"WARNING. ENEMY SHIP DETECTED FROM THE REAR. COUNTDOWN TO IMPACT IN TEN, NINE, EIGHT, SIX..."

"HUUWHAT! Huuwhat happened to seven!" Luxory shrieked.

"JUST KIDDING. SEVEN... SIX... FIVE... FOUR... THREE... TWO... ONE... HAVE A NICE DAY!"

"Yeaayuh, *thanks*," Luxory glowered, crossing his arms in an angry pout.

A few moments later, a fourth shining purple something was floating in the Tupperware dish.

A beautiful fireball lit the skies of Toontown that evening.

But this wasn't any ordinary fireball. It was so bright it made the bleak, rainy skies of the slums look like the brightest day of spring, beautiful rainbow lights shimmering shrapnel down from a smoky burst high in the air. The Toons woke from their bleary dreams and wandered out of their broken-down houses to watch.

Then it occurred to them that the explosion had spawned some sort of weird rainstorm. Huge, shining drops began to fall from the sky in the general direction of the explosion.

"Dad!" Gosalyn yelled, racing back and forth across the town square and gathering up the "raindrops". "Dad, look! It's not rain—it's MUNNY!"

"Well whaddya know?" Drake Mallard had just now broken himself out of jail with a paperclip and stared up at the sky as the munny came raining down.

But it wasn't just munny. Jewels, gold, precious family heirlooms, stolen items that the Toons had been missing terribly were falling from the sky and into the open arms of the characters who desperately needed them.

"Jessica! Sugar plum! Sweetheart!" Roger squealed joyously, speeding into the waiting arms of his voluptuous human wife, "I found your wedding ring! I *didn't* lose it when I fell into that open sewer!"

"Oh, Roger, darling, I'm so happy!" Jessica sighed, hugging her husband.

"This means that Lord Secks and Lord Luxury must have den beef eated! Er... been defeated!" stammered a short fellow in a brown hat and glasses.

"Isn't that wonderful!" the woman in rags cried happily.

"YAY! I'M RICH AGAIN!" cheered the llama.

The Toons gathered in town square for a happy celebration, a great bonfire and a dance concluding in the blissful group singing the Toontown official anthem, "Smile, Darn Ya, Smile".

"This calls for a masterpiece to commemorate the occasion!" a short blue bear in the crowd mumbled to himself, racing off to work as the inspiration hit him.

The G.S. Existentialist floated through space on its way to the next world, and Vexen was taking a much-needed chance to help himself recuperate.

"I think we've had a very good session, Vexen," Lexaeus took off his reading glasses and put away his psychiatry notes. "I think you're well on your way to beating this thing."

"Thank you, Lexaeus," Vexen sat up from the couch and stretched, taking a deep breath. "I heal a little more every day. You two will forgive me, of course, if I refuse to partake in any celebratory cake once this mission is done and over with?"

"Perfectly understandable," Xaldin assured him, leaning against the doorframe and enjoying a box of coconut almond pocky.

"I don't know what could possibly be worse than that world," Vexen mumbled, shaking his head.

"Now, it's not so much the concept of a crossover that is terrible," Lexaeus corrected him, heading up to take the controls of the ship. "But the trite, repetitive, clichéd and overdone crossover is something to be avoided."

"Not to mention, a crossover becomes difficult to maintain if you cannot properly keep your eyes on the characterizations of all the different characters involved," Xaldin added. "It's also quite perilous to maintain the 'feel' of each of the worlds you are attempting to invoke. It's in that aspect that Secks and Luxury utterly failed, resulting in the destruction of every world they touched."

"A shame, really," Vexen sighed. "There was so much potential."

"Except for that Inuyasha fellow," Lexaeus cut in. "He's completely hopeless."

The three all shared a laugh.

"And look at it this way, Vexen. We've seen the limit. There's nothing possibly worse that you could go through on this journey," Xaldin assured him.

"**Damn** right," Vexen huffed.

"I'm picking up a world in the near vicinity, gentlemen," Lexaeus called back to them. "Should we approach it?"

"Pick up some statistics first," Vexen replied. "What's the name of it?"

"Uh... readings indicate the place is called..." Lexaeus paused, and then made a very odd expression.

"Lexaeus, what world is it?" Xaldin urged.

"It's called 'Voreland'."

Vexen choked. Xaldin spit out bits of pocky.

"**ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT!**" they screamed in unison.

The G.S. Existentialist screeched to a halt and shot off in the opposite direction, full throttle.

Months later, the square of Toontown was a very different place. The buildings were clean and white with a fresh coat of paint, the roads were paved and what had once been piles of trash were now lustrous flower gardens.

In the center of it all, though, was a tall marble statue donated to the Toontown Civil Center by noted sculptor Gusto Gummi, a breathtaking and majestic work featuring a strapping man in a long coat with a head full of braids and most majestic of all, a pair of magnificent sideburns.

"*He robbed from the rich and he gave to the poor!*" sang the minstrel to the

children gathered around the statue as they joyfully clapped their hands and joined in.

"Stood up to The Man and he gave Him what for!

With his sideburns alert and a confident grin

The Hero of Toontown, the man called Xaldin!"

Hey, anybody who gets the references wins an automatic assurance that they are a Really Cool Person!

Sorry this chapter took so long! I really hate to be a whiny angsty sapmongerer, but uberthanks to all of you guys who enjoy my fic and leave me such wonderful comments. I've had a tough couple of weeks but knowing you guys appreciate all my work is just awesome. Thank you and may you pet many kittens!

And uh, no offense if vore is your cup of tea. But you're certainly not going to find it here.

And no offense to Paul Rodgers either. He sings well enough but come *on...* it's *Freddie*.

Incidentally, I'm sorry, Vexen. I am eternally devoted to paying you back for what I did to you.

Except For Me and My Monkey

Chapter Eight: Everybody's Got Something To Hide Except For Me and My Monkey

Roxas was having the most wonderful dream of his life. Or his un-life, if you prefer. The important thing is not to get technical with the living states of Nobodies, but rather the state of the dream.

For one thing, in his dream Roxas had no idea where he was or what was actually going on. He couldn't remember the Gutless attack, the siege of the Castle That Never Was, his abrupt kidnapping and the unfortunate chain of events that had been set in motion with his abduction. He could not remember the faces and names of his tormentors, nor could he remember their plans for him. Terrible, evil plans that would be set in motion soon after chapter nine.

For another, there was no risk of him waking up halfway through, right when it got to the good part— a most unpleasant occurrence, the author assures you, like this one time she dreamed she was the chick in the "Raining on Sunday" music video and Keith Urban was *just* starting to fiddle with her tanktop strap and then her alarm went off and she was late for work and the whole day was darker because she missed a chance for a dream-hickey from that stud and... um.

Roxas would sleep until he was awakened by either his captors or any would-be rescuers.

Contrary to what many of you may be thinking, Roxas was not dreaming about any sort of naughty "Raining on Sunday"-esque encounter with Axel or anybody else. We will make that perfectly clear.

No, Roxas dreamed of a summer that would never end. He dreamed of long lazy days with nothing to do but whatever he wished. He dreamed of blue oceans, white wave crests and turquoise sand bars stretching as far as the eye could see. He dreamed of a golden beach with lush green palms and warm breeze, juicy fruit cut up in a paper bowl and the remnants of popsicles sticky on the edge of his lips.

He dreamed of girls in bikinis.

The corners of his mouth curled into a dazed smile as he slept, securely bolted

down to a slab in the dankest corner in the deepest room of the darkest tower in Fandom Hearts.

The *second* darkest tower in Fandom Hearts glistened faintly with the last flash of lightning. Gloomy rain poured constantly down on its weather-beaten glass panes and sleek black steel roof.

Black steel clashed so bad with the mirrored glass.

The top room of the tower was an impressive, luxurious loft with black-painted walls decorated with posters of multiple-word-named bands like My Chemical Romance, As I Lay Dying, Avenged Sevenfold and The Wispy Silver Breath of Flaming Passion in a Sunny Meadow For My Beloved (another one of those dumb one-hit wonder punk bands that sound just like the other twenty thousand). Chains and washed-out shadowy photographs with a terrible case of the angles decorated gray bulletin boards and wrinkled Hot Topic shirts littered the ground and the back of an overstuffed black upholstered chair, where a very depressed being was currently sprawled out upside down.

From here... he could get his true twisted perspective on the sick world.

The tower's sole humanoid occupant was an experienced brooder for his age. Not quite so experienced as his old friend Secks had been, but with the unfortunate demise of the lycanthropic melodramatic he was now in the top spot. Secks had always been a good friend of his... or the closest thing he had to one, anyway, as it was plainly obvious that nobody cared whether he lived or died. But now Secks was gone...

It was so hard being at the top... alone.

He was off for the day, which left him with nothing to do but mope. He would have been brooding but out of respect for Secks he decided to abstain from that for a while. He'd have to stick with moping, glowering, languishing, pouting and sulking until nightfall.

Nightfall was the only time of day that matched his dark soul.

Suddenly, the pint-sized Seme was interrupted from his gloomy thoughts by a shrill beeping noise. He glanced up at the monitor before him and sighed heavily to see an unfamiliar signal beeping—something had just entered the world's

atmosphere. Something was zipping through the sky on its way to the city.

Something that would add to the misery of his already horrid day, week and existence in general. Sigh.

With an immense groan, he reached out of his chair for a gothic-styled telephone, one of the old ones with the turning dial instead of buttons. Unfortunately it was rather difficult to turn the number dial while upside down and sprawled out, so he ended up having to shift quite a bit to reach the speed dial.

After a moment or two of ringing the other end picked up and a soft voice asked tentatively, "...hello?"

"Demykins," he sighed heavily, "They're on their way."

"ISH THAT SHO!" the voice at the other end squealed in excitement. "I'LL HAVE TO READY MY SHPEDOODLEPANTIES!"

"You do that," he muttered. "I haven't got the will to deal with them. It's all too much effort."

"FIGHTING EVIL BY MOONLIGHT! WINNING LOOOVE BY DAYLIGHT! Clorox bleach turned all my hair white! I AM THE ONE CALLED MISTER SPOON!"

"You're an idiot."

"Awww WHY SO BLUE PANDA BEAR!" Demykins howled with laughter. "Dun be sho shad! DEMYKINSOMGWTFBBQVCR will deal with them and be done in time for CAPTAIN KANGAROO!"

With a final maniacal cackle, Demykins hung up on his end and Zexion's Seme sighed yet again, replacing the handset and sprawling out on the chair to wallow in despair.

Great. The *three* were here. Now they were *all* screwed.

Imagine, if you will, the paint aisle of a hardware store. More specifically the wooden shelves upon which there are stacked the paint sampler swatches—those colorful pieces of thin poster board with mock-ups of the paint colors on them for couples to hold up to each other and say things like "Grasshopper Smile will never

go in the family room! I was thinking more of a Traffic Cone Rhapsody or a Pencil Grindings Gray!"

Imagine somehow taking every paint color in those sampling swatches and turning the intensity up a hundredfold—past the threshold of visible light and into the spectrum they use for coloring children's TV shows these days. No—in fact, more intense than that. We are talking some intense color here. Liberace's rainbow sequin disco suit in stadium lightning intense.

Imagine taking every one of those intense-beyond-intensity colors and cartoonishly mixing them all together into one gigantic can of paint, with the colors staying separated but also running together to make even more colors, colors that have never before been fathomed by the human imagination. Every color in the infinitely possible spectrum from Red to Violet, from Mother of Pearl to Macaroni and Cheese, from Baby Poo Green to That Color They Say The Universe Is Teal.

Now imagine loading that paint into the bucket of a fire helicopter and spraying it haphazardly all over a major metropolitan area and the surrounding landscape, however impossible it may be to paint the sun Stabbing Your Eyes Out Pink.

If your imagination is lacking today, suffice it to say that our three heroes landed on a world that was *garishly* colorful.

It took five minutes or so for them to allow their eyes to adjust. They were used to black buildings on dark streets and a dark sky in the World That Never Was—the most colorful thing to be found there was Larxene's language during certain times of the month (mainly, always).

Other than the nauseating color scheme, the world did not appear too terribly different than the suburban part of the City of OC. Shops and homes stood along a central street, pleasantly crowded with all manner of zany characters and creatures, each odder than the last. In the distance floating over what appeared to be a city park was a tall and equally colorful steel tower, impressively suspended over the ground by an elaborate anti-gravity device and slowly following some preset orbit, lazily making its way east.

Rainbow-colored clouds drifted through a Technicolor sky, pouring some grainy white rain down on the landscape, coating purple trees and orange streets and colorful buildings in a fine layer of "snow". Llamas could be found in every direction and the scent of cheese wafted through the air. Monkeys worked on a long line of typewriters down Main Street. Cellophane flowers of yellow and green towered over your head. You could look for the girl with the sun in her eyes, but she was gone.

Bum bum bum.

"There was already a joke about that song in chapter five," Lexaeus said politely.

And there in the central square of the little city block, standing up high above the wacky cars and trees and people was a large sign, proudly proclaiming in all its colorful glory WELCOME TO...

VACILLATION HEIGHTS

"Let me guess," Xaldin began after a long moment of stunned silence, "Before we get any further in. This is what happens when 'clever' young writers 'cleverly' create a 'clever' world which features the 'clever' insertion of their 'clever' sense of humor."

"And 'cleverly' assume that by 'clever' humor, they mean idiotic driveling that they pull out of nowhere and cobble together in a grotesque mishmash of what they assume to be grade A 'clever' material," Vexen added.

"And then they 'cleverly' share these things with the world by 'cleverly' sticking some combination of the words 'random' and 'crack' in the summary, 'cleverly' protecting them from any criticism that may result by setting up a 'clever' defense at why their feeble attempts at 'clever' humor are moronic and appallingly bad?" Lexaeus concluded.

They glanced at each other for a few quiet seconds.

"My, wasn't *that* preachy?" Xaldin remarked with a smirk.

Vexen lifted his hands and caught a small sample of the white substance raining down upon the landscape. He put his tongue to it and sensed the immediate sharp sweetness of pure sugar. He sighed irritably. "May I be the first to offer the sincere hope that this voyage is very short?"

"Yes. Yes, you may," Xaldin assured him.

"Bad news, gentlemen," Lexaeus glanced down at the beeping world guidebook. "There's two signals here."

"Two signals of what?" Vexen did not sound the slightest bit pleased at this news.

"Two Semes," Lexaeus said grimly. "One nearby and one extremely far away."

"Darkness help us," Vexen groaned and buried his face in his palm.

"Any telling who they are?" Xaldin queried.

"No. But the list is growing rather short, after all," Lexaeus shrugged. "Cheer up gentlemen, it shouldn't be too difficult. We can take care of the Seme nearest to us first, and then head across the world a little ways to deal with the other."

"Very well," Vexen said with a resigned sigh, "But I swear, if there are any sophomoric attempts at 'humor' while I'm here-

He was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a purple llama on a scooter, zipping past the trio on the very walkway they were standing on. It shrieked "SURRENDER THE PANTS!" at the top of its lungs and sped away, cackling maniacally and singing old show tunes.

"- like that one," Vexen groaned. "I will not hesitate to kill something."

"That wasn't funny," Xaldin said in a dead tone of voice as they watched the llama disappear into the distance. "Unexpected, yes. Strange, yes, but *hardly* what I would call amusing. You could stick just about anything in that paragraph for the same reaction. You could have manatees pushing rubber balls with jokes written on them into a slot and get similar results."

"Ah, a veiled reference to a popular television show making fun of another popular television show," Lexaeus commented. "*That* is moderately funny."

"Indeed," Vexen sighed. "Far more amusing than this inexplicable obsession there seems to be with llamas."

"HIDEY-HO, VEXEN!" a small anthropomorphic chocolate cake said cheerfully, materializing out of nowhere to tug on the side of Vexen's coat.

With a scream of terror Vexen punted the jolly little fellow across the way and into a river, panting and gasping for breath.

"Now, see, *that* was funny," Xaldin pointed out, gesturing in the direction the cake had flown. "Having a cake of all things appear to frighten Vexen is amusing, based on past assumptions we have made about Vexen and his current feelings on the subject of cake."

"*That was not **in any way** funny!*" Vexen snarled furiously, looking about ready to

rip Xaldin's hair out by the handful.

"Oh but see, it was—had it been any other type of dessert or even a creature or animal, it wouldn't have been funny at all," Xaldin laughed slightly.

"Still preachy," Lexaeus warned them. "Let's try hiding the messages in amusing metaphors and drawn-out jokes."

"The usual, hmm? Sounds just fine to me," Xaldin shrugged.

Vexen dusted off his coat and brushed his hair back out of his eyes in a huff. "Let's get down to business. We'd better start pinpointing and following that signal if we ever want to get out of this hellhole. What direction is it coming from, Lexaeus?"

Lexaeus studied the back of the guidebook and finally pointed. "Here. Due west. Not terribly far... in fact, I would hazard to guess it may be coming from that rather conspicuous floating tower there. That looks like a rather obvious place for a Seme to be, doesn't it?"

"Indeed," Xaldin had ceased his teasing and now looked ready to get to work, staring up at the tower hovering over the park a short distance away.

"I must admit I'm curious," Vexen began as the three of them set off towards the tower in the distance.

"About what?" asked Lexaeus.

Vexen pursed his lips slightly and gestured over at the tremendous sign sticking up over the rainbow-colored buildings and trees. "The name of this world. It's Vacillation Heights, correct? Which would imply some sort of wavering quality to the world, or some kind of switching back and forth."

"What about it?" Xaldin pressed him onward.

"What could be so terribly wavering about a world centered around failed attempts at random humor?"

Oh, if only they knew.

Currently in charge of the world of Vacillation Heights was the loud fellow that

Zexion's Seme had spoken to on the phone earlier, DemykinsOMGWTFBBQVCR. Demykins for short. He did indeed reside in the floating tower that our three heroes were heading towards.

Demykins was currently taking a bath in a turtle-shaped sandbox filled to the brim with aquarium rocks, amusing himself by blowing bubbles with his spit. He was vaguely aware that there were three beings on the surface of his world that sought to do him harm, but he honestly couldn't be bothered at the moment. That Zexy-poo was such a worrywart. All he ever did was call up Demykins complaining that his "sooooul huuuurt" or his "woooounds just would not heeeeeal" or that he "loooonged for the sweet release of deaaaaath".

Zexy-poo was BORING.

Demykins was by all accounts a spastic fellow, though some could have deigned his behavior merely "quirky". A far more popular descriptor of him included the words "shrieking abhorrently obnoxious infantile twit". He bore only a passing resemblance to the Nobody who had spawned him, his demi-mullet decorated with what appeared to be paintbrush swatches of random colors. He also appeared to have given himself tattoos with a box of magic markers, as there was not an inch of his skin left untouched by cheerful scribbles of kittens, rainbows, sunshine, cheese, pants, llamas and purple monkeys.

It had been apparent since the day the Semes were born that Demykins was different than his brethren. They had their quirks, each and every one of them, but Demykins was the only one dubbed by the Superior to be completely incapable of handling an entire world all by himself. This may have stemmed from his tendency to miraculously lose his underwear out from beneath his ballerina tutu and Elvis suit in the middle of every single staff meeting.

As a result, the Superior assigned a very unenthused Zexy-poo to accompany Demykins down to Vacillation Heights and share the world with him in a complex arrangement that would no doubt bear some heavy emphasis on the plot of chapters eight and nine.

But now is not the time to fully discuss this arrangement, for suspense purposes.

Demykins smiled evilly as he managed a rather large bubble of his saliva. He leaned his head back against the edge of the sandbox and gazed lazily up at the strobe-lit ceiling with the plastic glow in the dark planets stuck up there with that weird sticky tack stuff that first grade teachers use. How he loved those planets. He'd had quite a difficult evening last night upon discovering that they took Pluto off

the list of planets, and in his fury he'd swallowed the tiny celestial body.

This morning's trip to the restroom had been *interesting*.

But there were far more important matters to attend to.

Demykins raised his fist and snapped his fingers. A trio of rainbow-colored Gutless that looked like small winged cows appeared above him, answering their master's call with a grunting "MOO."

"Francesca, those TERRIBLE Nobodies are coming to turn my butt inside out," Demykins lamented dramatically to the center one, kicking his feet up out of the sandbox and rolling over. "Be my shpeshul heartypants and go DESTROY them, pretty plz?"

"MOO," said the Gutless, who was apparently named Francesca.

"What! You changed your name to Poodlepants? WUHTUHFUH!" Demykins expressed dismay.

"MOO!" Francesca accentuated again.

"Oh! No, your brother-in-law is in town on business! That's wonderful! Well tell him if he wants to go to the oyster bar with us he'll have to provide his own tandem bicycle, 'cuz we're all out of room once we pack on Moira and Olae and Xipe-Toltec," Demykins went on happily.

"MOO?" Francesca let out a frustrated sigh.

"What? Don't be an idiot, Ricardo, Moira and Olae and Xipe-Toltec are MY NIPPLES!" Demykins squealed with glee and hopped out of the sandbox, spraying aquarium rocks everywhere and prancing over to the coat rack to get his Elvis suit and tutu. "BWAHAHAHAHAH! We'll show Zexy-poo-doodle-pantsy-pookie-pie-McGee who's the REAL MAN around here, GRRRR!"

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and burst into hysterical giggles, primping his hair and puckering his lips.

"Yes, Gutierrez, I don't care HOW you do it, but make sure those crankypants meanie-butts are dead before they get up here! Or rather that they don't get up here, because they can't get up here if they're dead. Unless you carry them. Ooh, on second thought, bring them to me and I'll deal with them myself! With RELISH!" he

cackled maniacally and held up a jar of sweet pickle relish.

Yes, there was no mistaking the pure evil that radiated from the depths of his non-existent Seme soul.

"McDoogle!" Demykins interrupted his peals of evil laughter suddenly, whipping his head from right to left. "Did you hear that! Somebody has penetrated the outer defenses of my impenetrable tower of IMPENETRABILITY!"

"MOO?" Francesca looked up in alarm.

"YES! YES!" he dropped to the ground and put his ear to the floor. "I can feel it coming back again! Like a roll of thunder chasing the wind! Oh! I feel it! I feel the cosmos!"

"MOO?"

"Right here, see, the cosmos piece fell off of my glow in the dark planet set a few weeks ago and I've been looking for it everywhere," Demykins held up a bit of plastic that could vaguely resemble the cosmos. "Oh yes, and it seems those noodly nuisance Nobodies have nobly entered my lair! You and your friends go down and give them a warm welcome!"

The three Gutless nodded and headed towards the door down into the stairwell of the tower. Before they vanished, their leader glanced back to see Demykins wrapping his head in a healthy layer of aluminum foil.

"I am activating the tower's defenses! WHEEEEE!" he shrieked stupidly.

Francesca rolled her eyes and gestured for her comrades to keep going and leave their diminutive master to his... whatever he was doing.

Imagine a place where anything can happen. And by anything, the author emphasizes absolutely anything. Logic and reality are twisted up into each other in a grotesque helix of absurdity, randomness reigns supreme, math, science and statistics are thrown to the wind in a greatly chaotic explosion of bright colors and wacky goings-on and silly animals and random sound effects, all cascaded over with a great coating of sugar.

Imagine taking an extra-large photograph of this place, a photograph so large it

would cover the side of a several story building like a mural. Imagine cartoonishly throwing this photograph into a giant blender with a half carton of strawberry kiwi flavored yogurt, ten cans of the obnoxiously colored paint you imagined earlier in the chapter, two pounds of sugar and a herring and hitting "liquefy".

Now imagine pouring the contents of the blender into a paint gun and giving it to a berserk gorilla riding on the back of a bull sprayed liberally with cow pheromones, and imagine setting the two of them loose in a tall foreboding tower with spiral staircases and sleek steel architecture not unlike the final level of a video game.

If your imagination is still lacking today, suffice it to say that the interior of Demykins' tower didn't look too terribly different than the outside.

"*Somebody's* desperate for more pages," Xaldin said with a smug smile from the other side of the fourth wall.

Our three heroes appeared horribly out of place inside the zany tower, shining beacons of cold black leather in sea of extravagant paint. They were making their way slowly up the spiral staircase around the outside of the tower, glancing warily at the many central floors of the tower and the insanity they housed.

"They don't appear to be Gutless," Vexen remarked in a quiet voice, trying to keep their presence in the tower a low-key affair. "Just... oddly placed kitchen appliances and bizarre animals."

"Lots of sugar as well," Lexaeus added, brushing away the powder building up on his head and shoulders like so much high-calorie dandruff. "Like some kind of twisted menagerie of insanity."

"This is still, of course, somebody's mistaken ideas about what constitutes as 'humor'," Xaldin grumbled ill-temperedly. It would take *hours* to get all this sugar out of his hair.

"Who would find *any* of this funny?" Vexen asked no one in particular, throwing his hands up in frustration as they passed a washing machine that bounced like an El Camino with hydraulics, blasting out "La Cucaracha".

"It's hard telling," Lexaeus seemed to be trying to puzzle out an answer to himself. "But I know this sort of imagination is more or less effortless."

"Yes," Xaldin felt strangely compelled to add, "It is the long and plot-filled pieces with the subtle, nuanced comedy that are so difficult. There ought to be more

appreciation for those who create such worlds in this sickening dimension of Fandom Hearts."

Vexen and Lexaeus glanced at him curiously. "What? Where did that come from?" Vexen asked.

Xaldin blinked for a moment. "You know, I'm not sure."

"Pathetic, desperate, egotistical little twit," Vexen rolled his eyes.

They shrugged and continued on their way up the tower.

Near the top floor, the stairs leveled out into a wide platform that crossed the tower's diameter. It was decorated in the style of a very odd garden, with tall statues of ironing boards and one regal depiction of Chad Kroeger. Flowers lined a long winding path across the floor to the elevators at the far end—and the fact that they were colorful should be quickly assumed. Confetti and pretzels were scattered liberally across the grounds and elevator music piped out of a speaker system from the walls.

Xaldin tested the elevator doors and found them to be locked, the call button unresponsive. A fairly obvious keyhole was set below the button, the key absent from the hook that should have held it.

"Well, now what?" Lexaeus asked, crossing his arms in puzzlement.

"This would, of course, be an opportune time for some kind of horrible Gutless monster to appear from behind us and display the key hidden on a ribbon around its neck, requiring us to utterly destroy it before we can move on," Vexen pointed out.

"**HAAAA!**" came a shrill noise from behind them.

"Dammit, Vexen, I hate it when you're right!" Xaldin winced without turning quite yet.

"We turn on three," Lexaeus sighed. "One, two..."

But as soon as they turned around they found themselves staring back at an adorable waist-high little bugger with yellow skin, blank eyes, fuzzy hair and an apple juice box clutched in his spindly hands.

"I HAVE GINGIVITIS!" the creature said proudly. He did not, however, have the

key around his neck. "I LIKE CEREAL!"

"Oh," our three heroes sighed with relief.

"GRRARRGGHNGGGHGH!" roared something climbing up the inside wall of the tower from behind the little creature.

"Oh," our three heroes sighed again.

"IT'S A LLAMA!" the yellow creature screamed and tore away as fast as his tiny legs would carry him.

"It certainly is," Xaldin remarked as the creature placed a gigantic hoof on the garden platform, slowly pulling itself up to face the intruders.

It was actually not so much a llama as it was some kind of mutated mass of rainbow-colored goo, which happened to have a llama sticking out of the front end. The fearsome pack animal bleated in rage and the rest of the goo began to boil and churn around it. More bleating llamas began to form out of the sludge as it continued its ascent up onto the platform.

"It's a llama," Vexen said.

"There's a llama," Lexaeus pointed out as well.

"And another little llama," Xaldin added.

"Fuzzy llama."

"Funny llama."

"Llama..."

"Llama..."

"DUCK!" Vexen screamed, and all three of them hit the deck as a wide arm formed out of the oozing mass, transfiguring itself into a blade and swinging wildly as though to decapitate the three intruders.

"Oh, I see," Xaldin said as he summoned his lances in a short gust, "It can transform into random things in the heat of battle!"

"Now it's a dishwasher," Lexaeus yanked his tomahawk up out of the ground beneath their feet and blocking a sudden barrage of frilly pink teacups with a quick swing.

"That's not very funny," Xaldin sighed. "The teacups are a nice touch, but it's just too out of left field."

"Well, would you prefer it turn into something tremendous with sharp teeth and fire breathing capabilities?" Vexen hissed under his breath as he drew up his shield.

The shape shifting blob suddenly quivered and turned itself into a four-tier wedding cake with buttercream icing and candy pastilles.

Vexen screamed in horror and chucked his entire shield at it, knocking the creature down and off the platform to the floor below them.

"Now see, *that* was funny," Xaldin remarked between bursts of laughter. "By now the cake has become a running joke at the expense of poor Vexen, you see. It will remain funny as many times as it happens."

"It will NOT!" Vexen roared, calling his shield back to his hand and trembling as he brushed strings of sweat-soaked hair from his eyes.

"Really, yes it will," Xaldin grinned.

"Not as funny as it'll be when I rip every one of those braids out of your thick skull and strangle you with them!" Vexen glared at him.

"Gentlemen," Lexaeus cut in, gesturing to the other side of the platform where a tremendous Technicolor hand grasped the edge as though to pull the creature it belonged to back up. "Could we perhaps save this for another time?"

A primal scream echoed across the tower and the blob pulled itself up onto the platform, now in the shape of noted Canadian songstress Celine Dion. The creature's growling became a high-octave warbling as she burst into song.

"WHEN I TOUCH YOU LIKE THIS! AND I HOLD YOU LIKE THAT! IT'S SO HARD TO BELIEVE BUT IT'S AAAAALL COMING BAAACK TO ME NOOOOOOOW!"

She was interrupted a moment later by hysterical laughter from her three Nobody opponents.

"Now THAT is funny," Vexen clapped his hands in mirth. "That song is the *pinnacle* of melodramatic hilarity."

"Mmph, we are in agreement there, my friend," Xaldin chuckled and shook his head.

"If she had sung the song from Titanic we might *really* be in trouble," Lexaeus added.

It took a moment for the three of them to calm themselves down, and by that point Celine had become a fearsome colossus with a microphone-turned spiked club in one hand and the other hand forming into sharp claws ripe for the impaling.

"Right," Xaldin's voice dropped suddenly. "Let's do this. Diversionary Tactic Three followed by Combined Attack Forty-Five, finishing with a triple combination if it comes to that. Prioritizing offense with rising defense should it fail. Sound good?"

"Golden," Vexen nodded.

"And keep an eye out for the key," Lexaeus reminded them.

Then they broke into formation.

Xaldin suddenly threw his hands to the side and he rose into the air, six lances encircling him in a protective barrier of wind and sharp pointy things as he glided up to meet the colossus face-to-face. It growled ferociously and took a few swings at him, all of which he deflected or dodged, starting to send his lances out one by one to swipe at its face or hands.

Meanwhile, down on the ground and out of the creature's sight thanks to Xaldin, Lexaeus and Vexen were collaborating on what looked to be a powerful attack, a spinning and glowing orb of brown and blue magic swirling together and growing bigger and bigger, rising up into the air and slowly taking a physical shape.

"Xaldin, bring it this way!" Lexaeus yelled.

Xaldin nodded and flew off to one side. The colossus lunged after him and ran nearly face-first into the developing attack.

"And NOW!" Vexen dropped his hands and Lexaeus did the same. Their joint attack suddenly exploded, showering onto the colossus like a party popper, if said party popper was full of two-ton boulders and six thousand pounds of snow and ice,

an impressive avalanche that knocked the colossus down to the ground and buried it.

By the time Xaldin landed back on the platform, Lexaeus was hurriedly entombing the icy mound, monster and all, in a thick layer of the hardest stone he could summon.

"Very nice work, gentlemen," Xaldin commented, flipping his braids back over his shoulder.

"Thank you," Vexen tossed his head slightly and brushed himself off. "The key, Lexaeus?"

Lexaeus kneeled and placed one hand on the stone, a moment later drawing it away with the key in hand. "Right here."

"That was almost too easy," Xaldin glanced over at the mound that had been their enemy, sideburns bristling with concern.

"Please don't say something amusingly ironic about it bouncing back with twice the power and invulnerability—because you know that it will happen exactly as you say just for laughs," Vexen warned him.

"Let's just get in the elevator and get on with it," Lexaeus urged them both, already putting the key into the keyhole and turning it to restart the elevator. "According to the guidebook the Seme's chambers ought to be right above us."

"The sooner we deal with this Seme the sooner we can get out of this hellhole and its idiotic attempts at being funny," Vexen groaned, shoving the elevator door open and stepping inside.

The doors closed and the elevator began its slow ascent up to the top of the tower...

Where Demykins, head wrapped in tinfoil and wielding a broom handle, was rocking out hardcore.

"SHOOTIN' AT THE WALLS OF HEARTACHE, BANG BANG! I am... *The Warrior!*" he howled.

"And why am I not surprised it's Demyx's Seme?" Xaldin said drolly.

"I saw that coming a mile away," Vexen sighed.

"Demyx!" Lexaeus shouted to get the oddball's attention, tightening his hand around his tomahawk. "We've come to take you back where you belong!"

"They're coming to take me away—HA HA! HO HO! HEE HEE! To the funny farm, where life is beautiful all the time and I'll be happy to see those nice young men in their clean white coats and they're coming to take me AWAAAAY!" Demykins didn't seem to have heard them come in, and it wasn't until he saw the three of them standing in the doorway of his equally spastic loft that he seemed to have a problem. "Ah! YOU! Mr. Yagel warned me about you!"

"We want to make this nice and quick, Demyx-whatever-you're-calling-yourself," Xaldin informed him, drawing one of his lances out of the air and pointing it at him. "Just hold still and we'll have you in the Tupperware with the others in no time."

"Mmmm... I dun wanna go in the Tupperware," Demykins whined, scratching his hair beneath his tinfoil helmet. "It smells like spaghetti in there and I'm allergic to OREGON."

"You aren't being given a choice, I'm afraid," Vexen held his shield up defensively, preparing to strike.

"Aw NO! Mommy told me bout the BAD MEN! I'm not-" Demykins drifted off slowly, and then suddenly whipped his attention to the floor. "OH MY GOD!"

The three Nobodies leapt at least a foot back all of a sudden, when Demykins fell to his knees on the ground and grabbed something.

"I FOUND A BOWL! Good for ME!" he shrieked, pointing with glee at the Hello Kitty-patterned pink bowl he'd just discovered.

"Congratulations," Xaldin rolled his eyes. "Now stand up and fight, or stay there and we'll take care of you."

Something wicked suddenly glinted in Demykins' eyes. He grinned and placed the bowl on his head, leaping up to his feet and backing up towards a control panel at the far end of the room. "I'm afraid, Mr. Bond, that your taking care of will not be occurring this evening! Bwahah!"

He snapped his fingers before turning to rapidly punch commands into the control panel. "STELLAAAAA! KILL THEM!"

Francesca the Gutless and her (?) cronies appeared in short puffs of smoke, and she turned on Demykins mooing indignantly.

"What? Oh, what's that? You're going to Las Vegas to marry the toilet and you can't do it unless you get an annulment from Lawrence Fishburne?" Demykins gasped.

"MOO!"

"Oh! I'm very well aware your name is Francesca, darling," he purred in response. "Now destroy the intruders cuz I CAN'T FIGHT THIS FEELING ANYMOOOORE! I'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT I STARTED FIGHTIN' FOOOOOOR! And if I have to crawl upon the floor or come crashin' through your door, BABY I CAN'T FIGHT THIS FEELING ANYMOOOORE!"

Francesca rolled her eyes and gestured towards the three intruders. Her Moo Gutless companions let out long grunts and prepared their attack.

"I feel stupider for having witnessed that," Vexen commented.

"You're not the only one," Xaldin groaned.

"EGADS!" Demykins suddenly screamed, glancing out the window. "I'M RUNNING OUT OF TIME! The sun is almost setting!"

Though our three heroes would have loved to know exactly what Demykins meant by that (and would wish they had known sooner when the time finally came for them to discover it), they were immediately distracted by the onslaught of Moo Gutless that began pouring in from smoky portals on all sides of the room, charging at them with horns and hooves and udders ablaze with fury.

Unfortunately for Demykins and Francesca, the Moo Gutless were a terribly weak little species and it didn't take much work at all for Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus to smash through their illogical ranks in a minimal amount of time, leaving nothing but the turtle sandbox standing between Demykins and his impending doom.

Francesca, however, survived because she had a name and was therefore loved by all.

"Ah... ah... POTATO!" Demykins yelled, pointing across the room.

"That's not going to work, Number Nine," Lexaeus said seriously, narrowing his eyes at the freakish incarnation of their comrade. "Now hold still and we'll make it quick."

"YOU'RE TOO LATE!" Demykins did not sound as obnoxiously random as he had a moment ago, his voice laced with poison as he extended an accusatory finger at the three of them. "I am destroying this tower with you inside of it! You'll be CRUSHED TO DEATH beneath TONS of RAINBOW-COLORED STEEL! You'll go CRASHING through the sky of Vacillation Heights, screaming in a GIANT FIREBALL until it EXPLODES upon impact and ALL THREE OF YOU DIE INSTANTLY! BWAHAHAHAHAHAAA!"

Sure enough, a large digital clock display lit up on top of the control panel, giving the Nobodies only three minutes to get their business done with and get out of the tower. The three of them looked decidedly unconcerned about this. They could, after all, teleport.

"One minor problem," Vexen spoke up icily, "*You're* in the tower too. You'll die along with us."

"... Oh, right!" Demykins burst out giggling. "Heheehee, I'm such a SQUISHBRAIN! Oh well! Only one thing to do now!"

"Give up?" Xaldin suggested.

"No! PRESS THE MAGIC BUTTON!" Demykins howled with laughter and poked himself in what would have been his navel.

The three Nobodies stared, unamused.

"Oh, or I could press this one," Demykins reached over to the control panel and pressed a second "magic button", which shot a bright light out of a small spotlight and engulfed Demykins in what appeared to be a tractor beam. "HAHA YOU SUCKERS! I AM TELEPORTING OVER TO STAY WITH MY GOOD FRIEND ZEXY-POO AND NOW YOU THREE WILL DIE!"

Lexaeus lunged to try and keep him from escaping, but Demykins' body already appeared to have been phased out by the teleporter and he went right through. He quickly recovered back to his feet in time to see Demykins disappear from the room with ominous final words.

"HAVE FUN AFTER DARK, POODLEPANTS! BWAHAHAHAHAHAA!"

"Dammit! We lost him!" Xaldin growled furiously.

"He'll be at the other tower with, apparently, Zexion's Seme," Vexen said quickly, "But we've more pressing matters, such as escaping from this tower."

"What did he mean by 'after dark'?" Lexaeus posed an eerie question.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Vexen insisted. "Let's get out of here!"

The three of them vanished into their own dark portals, leaving the Rainbow Tower to explode back into the shiny rainbow glitter it had apparently been born from.

In the second darkest tower in Fandom Hearts, now hovering just on the edge of the city limits of Vacillation Heights, Zexy-poo was preparing for nightfall.

The darkness of the night was the only time he felt his spirit could properly flourish. He felt whole at night, when the world of Vacillation Heights was under *his* control.

The Dark Tower but Not So Dark as That Other Tower Tower was hovering carefully just along the border of the shadow of night, just out of reach of the setting sun's light. An observant eye could make out the landscape changing drastically as the light drained away and the shadow overtook it. Hell, an unobservant eye probably would have noticed it too.

Zexy-poo adjusted the oversized robes covering his black fishnet tanktop and baggy pants with straps belting the legs together in six different places. His chains jangled and his spiked collar looked divine as the light drained away outside. A slow, evil grin crossed his face as the land twisted under cover of night.

And suddenly a scream echoed throughout the Almost Darkest Tower.

"LUUUUCYYYY! I'M HOOOOOOOOOOOOME!"

Zexy-poo's face sank immensely and you could almost hear his emo little spirit being crushed beneath the boot heel of his damn annoying comrade-in-arms

spending the night.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus had observant eyes. They had landed somewhere in the middle of the central park area, and from the hill in the center of the park they could see shadows overtaking the land in the distance, and the landscape twisting around the darkness.

"What in the name of nothing is going on?" Xaldin said in a voice that held the hint of distant dread.

"I don't know," Vexen stared at the approaching wall of shadows, "But I don't like it at all."

"Gentlemen," Lexaeus diverted their attention over a large tree that turned out not to be a large tree, but to be the signpost of the immense VACILLATION HEIGHTS sign they had seen from a distance earlier. For the first time they could make out a small plaque on the bottom part of the signpost, inscribed with small, scribbly writing.

The three of them rushed over to the sign and leaned forward to read it as the light around them faded.

"WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF VACILLATION HEIGHTS.

Your Esteemed Overlords As Assigned by the Grand Master Fangirl, DemykinsOMGWTFBBQVCR and Zexy-poo extend to you a warm handshake of welcome and remind you that MINDLESS CONFORMITY is our chiefly regarded system of operation here!

We hope you will enjoy your stay!

Due to labor disputes and the fact that one of Your Esteemed Overlords is too stupid to tie his own shoes, leadership of this world will be divided into two preset periods of time, DAY and NIGHT.

During the DAY you will be lorded over by Your Esteemed Overlord Demykins and his Reverence For All Things Random and Cracky.

During the NIGHT you will be lorded over by Your Esteemed Overlord Zexy-poo and his Reverence For All Things Dark and Angsty.

To ease the objection and frustration that this may cause in you, Our Loving Subjects, we have installed a mechanism that will put you and the landscape both in the proper mindset for your Current Esteemed Overlord.

Mechanism will take effect every twelve hours at precisely 6:00 and will be *mostly* painless.

Any complaints about the Mechanism process shall be discussed with Zexy-poo and Demykins and followed by your immediate torturous death.

Have A Wonderful Day/Horrible and Depressing Night!"

Once all three Nobodies had backed away from the sign and regarded each other with concerned glances, Xaldin was finally the first to speak.

"So let me get this straight," he said in a dead sort of voice, "When darkness washes over us, we're going to be brainwashed into mindlessly depressed and whiny versions of ourselves."

"Sounds about right," Vexen replied in an equally lifeless tone.

"But only until daybreak. At daybreak we will turn into insane random 'crack' beings like the rest of the pathetic souls we have been encountering all day," Xaldin continued, still without a trace of life in his voice.

"I think that's the gist of it," Vexen said.

"Oh *hell*," Lexaeus groaned succinctly.

"Now, now," Xaldin said, ushering for the other two to follow him as he made a beeline east to put some distance between them and their impending angsty brainwashing in the wave of shadow. "There must be some way out of this..."

"I'm not willing to count on thinking of something later!" Vexen snapped, "We've got to put a stop to this nonsense before we end up trapped on this world forever!"

"Strong minds, gentlemen," Lexaeus encouraged them, "We have to stay calm and remain strong! If we panic we'll be lost—we've just got to keep clear heads about this..."

They turned to watch the trees across the park from them losing all trace of color except drab, lifeless gray. The branches drooped, the leaves fell and the trees were

coating in a thick layer of sudden rain. The landscape touched by shadow was dead, barren and depressing, with run-down buildings and miserable-looking inhabitants freezing to death on the street corners and wrapped in ragged cloaks. It looked like somebody had driven through with a boombox blasting "Helena". Even the grass was depressed (and/or annoyed) to death.

"Keep focused on the objective!" Lexaeus told them, still inching back and away from the advancing darkness. "We must get inside that tower and kill the Semes and get off of this world. We're going to restore the Organization. Keep your minds clear and strong, we can fight this. We're going to finish this!"

"It's getting closer," Xaldin narrowed his eyes, his sideburns on high alert.

"We can't outrun it," Vexen groaned, "We haven't time to call the ship."

"Keep focused!" Lexaeus repeated. "Remember, we've got to keep focused! What matters is what we have to do and not what we feel— Everybody brace yourselves..."

And they were suddenly overtaken by the wall of shadow, darkening and killing the grass beneath their feet and the trees alongside them. Angry, angry trees. The colors vanished into grays, browns and cold blacks, the rainbow water in the fountains turned scummy, the flowers died and the world was left a depressing shade of its former self, run-down and desolate, a rhapsody for the power of humanity's dreams and the utter failure of all dreams to take off, instead crashing to the ground like a five ounce swallow laden with a five pound coconut and leaving nothing but whining angst in their wake.

In the darkest tower in Fandom Hearts, Roxas stirred slightly in his dream.

An attractive woman had just lost her bikini top.

The corners of his mouth curled into a dazed smile as he slept, securely bolted down to a slab in the dankest corner in the deepest room of the darkest tower in Fandom Hearts.

Whuh oh! Cliffhanger!

Haha, in case you guys couldn't tell, this chapter covers a topic that is rather dear to my heart... Also I chose to do a dual world here because I didn't think I'd have

enough fodder to cruelly mock both angstfic and crackfic in four separate chapters. So I've crammed them both together in a monstrous mishmash of mockery. Alliteration is fun! HURRAH!

Ah yes, and Cheese is and always will be INSPIRED randomness. Apple juice boxes to Gext and Raina, who checked over the chapter to make sure I wasn't babbling like a twit.

Also have you ever seen that "The Warrior" music video? Oh my God, it's CREEPY.

Stay tuned for chapter 9!

Crawling In My Skin

Chapter Nine: Crawling In My Skin

When we last left our heroes at the suspenseful, cliffhanger ending to chapter eight, they had just been swept over by an evil wave of darkness that would, according to the laws of the world, sweep over them and transform their every happy, angry, annoyed or ambivalent feeling into Evangelion™ Brand 100 Pure Angst, No Artificial Colors.

This sounds like quite a dangerous situation. If Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus were busy angsting heavily about their own problems, how would they ever find the strength to hunt down Zexion and Demyx's Semes, then travel onwards on their journey to destroy the Semes and liberate Fandom Hearts and restore Organization XIII back to its proper state? Would they be trapped here in Vacillation Heights for the rest of their miserable unlives, wandering the streets sobbing and crying and whining things like "You develop a broken heart, but you're *born* with a broken *soul*"? Would Xaldin comb his braids over his eyes and piece his ears with a safety pin? Would Vexen dye his hair black and wear makeup? Would Lexaeus cut holes in the knees of his pants and write lame poetry?

Those of you who are more studious may have taken the gap between chapters to write out an in-depth research paper regarding the effect of evil worldly angst-waves on Nobodies, describing instead of the above scenario your own twisted reality in which somehow this would wipe their personalities completely, leaving them empty and open to corruption into the master plan of the Grand Master Fangirl and her Seme pawns of Orgy IX.

Some of you may have even lay awake at night, wondering what would become of the three Nobodies in this much-alluded to chapter nine, fraught with worry.

Unfortunately for all of you, you have forgotten that Nobodies don't have hearts. Therefore they are not capable of feeling emotions, and therefore there is nothing for an evil worldly angst-wave to wipe out and transform into soul-killing angst.

"That's a relief," Lexaeus sighed, as our three heroes picked themselves up off the ground, none the worse for wear, to examine their new surroundings.

What had before been an obnoxiously colorful wackyland where anything could

happen had become a desolate wasteland, a landscape of grays, browns, blacks and more grays. Plants and trees and cliffhangers lay dried up and dead in the brown fields and the buildings were run down with boarded-up windows and cracked doors swinging on creaky hinges. Beings that had before been colorful llamas, silly creatures on scooters and happy little elves frolicking gaily had become pale, weak, sickly shades of their former selves, leaning in the alleys and occasionally playing melancholy tunes on squeaky harmonicas.

And ushering in the woe, floating high above them in the air, was the second darkest tower in all of Fandom Hearts.

"One tower down, and one to go," Xaldin grumbled, his braids flicking in the cold wind as the three of them surveyed the approaching citadel.

"Sure enough, two Semes are residing in that tower," Vexen told them, checking the signal in the back of the world guidebook. "Demyx's, and as he mentioned, Zexion's."

"Look at it this way," Lexaeus said optimistically, "Nothing can be worse than what we encountered back in chapter seven."

"What *you* encountered?" Vexen grumbled. "Pardon if I fail to sympathize with you two for the *horrors* you endured. I, on the other hand, I'm *never* going to hear the end of mine."

"Nonsense, Vexen. It can't stay funny forever," Xaldin assured him.

"It's become a running joke!" Vexen snapped. "It's ensured to be popping up constantly at least until the end of the story. And then darkness forbid some clever little nitwits will start referencing it in their own invocations of me! 'Vexen is phobic at tea party!' 'Vexen vs. The Bundt!' 'Vexen screams at hoard of attacking cup... cup...' Ugh, I can't even say it!"

"Now really isn't the time, Vexen," Lexaeus sighed.

"We're going to encounter the author sometime, I just *know* it," Vexen said, mostly to himself. "And when we do, I am going to beat her senseless."

Speaking of beating people senseless, Zexy-poo could honestly sympathize with Vexen's violent urges.

At the moment, he was doing his best to finish his evening brooding, an event that took place from six o'clock to six-thirty every night without fail. It was absolutely vital to the rest of his schedule that the evening brooding take place precisely at six o'clock with no interruptions—otherwise he would not have time for his six-thirty angsting, his seven o'clock pissing and moaning, his half-hour soak in the tub (in the dark, with black candles and sex on the beach incense) at seven-thirty, House at eight o'clock and then a three hour bout of feeling sorry for himself.

And it was very difficult to finish your evening brooding when your Evanescence CD is being constantly interrupted by screeching, crashing and banging noises coming from the direction of your *boudoir*.

"Demykins!" Zexy-poo yelled irritably, rubbing his mascara-stained tears off his face *just* as they'd gotten the way he liked them.

"YEEES-A!" his colleague answered back from the other room, accompanied by the sound of Zexy-poo's mattress snapping in half.

"I *told* you to stay **out** of my **boudoir**!"

"... OKAAAAAY."

With the sound of his precious sarcastic Hot Topic t-shirt collection scattering out of its velvet-lined drawer and into the ceiling fan, Zexy-poo placed a hand to his forehead.

"That means get OUT!"

"Awwwwwwwwwwwuuuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" poured forth from Demykins' throat, and was quickly labeled the whiniest sound ever known to man, except for anything by the band Linkin Park. He slumped out of the room, tattoos of kittens drawn in black eyeliner smudged all over him and his head shoved through the armhole of Zexy-poo's favorite and cleverest shirt. "You laugh because I'm different, I laugh because you're all the same." Oh, the mirth of the irony in that garment.

"And get your disgusting body away from my things!" Zexy-poo hissed, pointing a black nail-polished finger at him. "That eyeliner is EXPENSIVE! Agh! You just don't UNDERSTAND ME!"

Demykins tilted his head in fascination as Zexy-poo resumed his brooding,

crumpling in on himself and curling into the fetal position on the floor. He probably would have cut his wrists too, if the author thought wrist-cutting was an appropriate feature in any context in any sort of fanfic. For her purposes, she will replace the action of cutting ones' wrists with the action of gorging oneself on a half pint of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream—an activity that is soothing, safe and *delicious*.

"Zexywexymexytexy?" Demykins said curiously, leaning down over Zexy-poo's shoulder.

"Go *away*. I'm *releasing my pain*," Zexy-poo growled.

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

"Why?"

"Because it eases the pain of my aching soul."

"Why?"

"Because it expresses my inner anguish."

"Why?"

"Because it allows me to get out the feelings I am bottling up inside myself that would otherwise rot me to the core... though they are halfway there."

"Why?"

"Because I haven't been *brooding* enough."

"Why?"

"*Because*," Zexy-poo growled between clenched teeth, "I have to *put up*. With you."

"Whyyyy?"

"Because I pulled the worst lot in our entire organization and they all hate me."

"Why?"

"Because they don't *understand* me."

"Who?"

"The rest of our organization."

"What?"

"Don't understand me."

"Why?"

"Because they just don't, okay?"

"Wow I really, really love all the lighting effects you've got going on in here— they balance well with the texture of the west side of the room and really serve to enhance the feng shui," Demykins commented.

"Stop *talking*. I can't hear my *brooding music*," Zexy-poo growled again behind a mouthful of walnuts and fudge chunks.

"YOU CRIED I'D WIPE AWAY ALL OF YOUR TEARS! WHEN YOU SCREAMED I'D FIGHT AWAY AAAAALL OF YOUR—"

Demykins eyed the stereo on the end table behind his mopey comrade and tilted his head at it quizzically. Sure enough, Amy Lee was supplying enough angst for several people, surely enough to keep Zexy-poo happily brooding for hours and hours. Well, if *happily* brooding is even possible, that is. Curiously, he reached over and pressed a shiny button, and-

"—ALL THESE MIXED *EMOTIONS* WE KEEP LOCKED AWAY LIKE STOLEN PEEAAAARLS! STOLEN PEARL DEVOTIONS WE KEEP LOCKED-- "

Zexy-poo screamed and leapt to his feet, flailing wildly until he knocked the stereo to the ground and sent the CD rattling across the floor. Then he glared up at Demykins with an expression of pure, straight loathing.

There were a few uneasy seconds of silence before Demykins' giggling broke its way into the conversation.

"Zexy-poo listens to *Savage Garden*?" even Demykins understood the implications of such a thing, stifling hysterical giggles behind his hand and making loud snorting noises.

"I do NOT!" Zexy-poo snapped. "Shut up! You don't **get** me! You wouldn't understand even if I *DID* listen to them! And I DON'T! I've never even *heard* that song!"

"*Suuuuuuure*," Demykins laughed, slapping his knees in mirth. "And I'm Ron Burgundy!"

There was an indignant gasping sound as Zexy-poo stared in torment at his colleague, very abruptly knocking over the end table and screeching at the top of his lungs.

"Okay!" Demykins replied.

"I'M NOOOOT OKAAAY! I don't *belong* on this disgusting world with your disgusting sunshine and flowers and colors and... and..." Zexy-poo screamed, looking close to ripping his gelled-up hair out. Then he shoved a huge spoonful of ice cream in his mouth and his eyes turned red, black-stained tears starting to appear at the corner of his eyes. "MMFPFGHGHFFMGMHMHMFHGHMMM!"

"Uh huh... uh huh... uh huh..." Demykins nodded with each syllable as though taking careful notes in his head.

"MGMPGHGHGGHGMG—the youngest and everybody ALWAYS picks on me and the MEAN GIRLS AT SCHOOL USED TO GIVE ME SWIRLIES in the LADIES BATHROOM and I- MMGPGHGGHGHHHMM... MMM... OH GOD THAT'S GOOD..."

"There there now. Let it all out," Demykins gave him a friendly pat on the back and rest his arm over his shoulder.

"HOW DO THEY GET IT SO BANANA? MMMM GOD! But NOBODY understands me! And I'm not even a NOBODY we're SEMES so we don't have HEARTS a-and we don't have BRAINS and LUNGS and LIVERS and my SOUL ACHES FOR A LIVER!"

"Liver let die," Demykins sighed sadly.

"AND TO TOP IT ALL OFF—" Zexy-poo shrieked dramatically, spraying droplets of melted ice cream from his mouth in his tantrum. "I HAVE TO SHARE THE WORLD

WITH YOU, YOU DISGUSTING SOCKET-LICKING MARKER-EATING CROSS-EYED BUFFOON!"

"Hey, can I have some fishy crackers?" Demykins asked

That did it.

With a melodramatic scream of torture and rage and pain from the very depths of his broken soul, the soul in which his rage and misery had festered and fermented for all of his short Seme life, so much angst and torment he could no longer hold it in, like the black raven escaping from the blood red cage into which it has been locked by the oppressive bone white hands of the dark shadowy voice in his head coming in dreams to crush the wishes of the night beneath the wicked heel of the bonereaper's fleshcraving bloodlust of the vampiric midnight etc, etc, the words burst forth in a cry of, "GET OUT! NOW! YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND! YOU'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND- AAGGGH!"

Then the emotional Seme burst into tears and ran screaming to his boudoir, slamming the door behind him with the final insult, an explosive string of curses and a concluding note of "***I HATE YOU!***"

Demykins, meanwhile, picked up the CD off the floor, examined it closely, and then licked all the dust off of it. Then he ran off to find someone who'd be interested in the size of the booger he'd just found hanging from his lip.

"Well," Vexen said, eyeing the shrine to Jhonen Vasquez that greeted the trio as they made their way into the entrance hallway of the Second Darkest Tower. "This looks to be a painful endeavor."

"Oh, I don't know," Lexaeus replied, "The way things are looking, this tower could actually turn out to be more humorous than the last one."

"Particularly if we run into any cake," Xaldin said snidely.

"*That* was uncalled for."

The interior of the Second Darkest Tower looked like a particularly disheveled Hot Topic outlet—not that it's very difficult to find those, mind you. It was difficult to see the steel inner walls behind the shrouds of punk band posters, Emily the Strange merchandise and Green Day throw pillows that had been tacked to the walls with

glow in the dark neon black light pushpins. The stairs wound up and up and up along the outside of the tower, tracing around inner platforms as they had in the Rainbow Tower. These platforms, however, instead of decorated with colorful creatures and craziness, stood as shrines to the inner pain of a whiny preteen feeling the weight of the whole world on his scrawny, prepubescent shoulders.

Our heroes reached the top floor of the tower and the door that sealed the way into the chambers of Zexy-poo without much difficulty. But...

"The door's locked," Lexaeus announced, testing the handle. "And there's no sign of a keyhole."

"There is a rather large indentation in the door up here," Xaldin said, tracing around the circular dent with a finger. "Perhaps this activates the locking mechanism?"

"Oh for the love of *nothing*," Vexen groaned.

"What's that about?" Lexaeus asked.

"Don't you realize what this means?" Vexen rolled his eyes in utter frustration. "A large indentation in the door can only mean one thing—there's got to be something shaped like that around here that we use as a key."

"So?" Xaldin raised an eyebrow.

"So of course, that object is going to be something absolutely nonsensical, like a stained glass toilet brush or some kind of giant holy insignia," Vexen continued. "And of course, this object is not going to be anywhere nearby. Oh no. It's going to be locked up on the complete other end of the tower, behind six other locked doors, also sealed by ridiculously complicated keys and puzzles. Maybe even pieces of keys and puzzles, which we will have to run off and fetch in the most ludicrous of places before we can even *think* about getting out of here."

"You're such a pessimist, Vexen," Xaldin chuckled. "We are members of Organization XIII. We're prepared for anything. What could possibly happen to keep us from opening this door within the next two minutes?"

"I'll tell you what," Vexen snapped. "We're only seven pages into the chapter, that's what. And *she* is going to stretch it out as long as she possibly can."

"There's an inscription on the wall here," Lexaeus pointed out to something

scribbled in what appeared to be blood red nail polish—actually magic marker. "It says '*To the depths of the basement go those who do not hold the Red Basin*'."

"And what in the worlds is the Red Basin?" Xaldin asked.

His query fell on deaf ears, however, as Vexen and Lexaeus were currently tumbling down six stories through a trap door that had opened precisely as Xaldin had spoken. Conveniently enough, Xaldin was also a victim of this trap door.

He stared at the narrative in disbelief. "'*Conveniently*'?"

"*Where* exactly are we falling?" Vexen yelled, brushing his hair out of his face as they fell.

"I don't know, but it's approaching quickly," Lexaeus said. "A Dramatic Landing, gentlemen?"

"Let's."

One improbable slow-falling swooshy-coat and hair dramatic landing on their feet later, our heroes found themselves deep in the basement of the Second Darkest Tower.

"Wait a minute," Xaldin complained, "This tower is *floating in midair*. A basement would require some kind of subterranean construction. How in the hell are we suddenly in a *basement*?"

"I think the more important question is how we get back up," Lexaeus mused, staring up at the last of the light from above as the tunnel sealed itself.

"How *annoying*," Vexen sighed. "Tell me again, what does this have to do with angst?"

"I hesitate to say," Lexaeus said, as examined a very psychological mural on the wall. After hours and hours of arguing about Freud on forums and looking up ancient Babylonian mythology and translating the hieroglyphics, its meaning basically amounted to "Wah wah, nobody understands me".

The impossible basement chamber was dark, lit only by a few sex on the beach scented candles shaped like Foamy the Squirrel placed in odd corners of the room. The three Nobodies split up and began to hunt for a means to escape.

"I seem to have found an old piece of parchment," Xaldin announced.

"I found half of a squeezed lemon," Vexen said.

"I've got a 100-watt lightbulb stuck in a broken Tiffany lamp," Lexaeus added.

"Here is a bit of broken wire," Xaldin held it up between his fingers.

"A pair of pliers," Vexen put them in his pocket.

"A tube of superglue," Lexaeus carefully made sure the cap was on.

"I've found a book of matches."

"The funnel from an old phonograph."

"A philosophy textbook."

"Season Three of MacGuyver on DVD."

"A Nalgene water bottle full of Goldfish crackers."

"The keys to a 1997 Buick LeSabre with a teddy bear keychain on them."

"A carton of liverwurst."

"Two sticks of butter."

"Britney Spears' Greatest Hits."

"Merciful darkness, Lexaeus!" Xaldin said quickly, "Throw that away before it kills somebody."

"Now we have a broken CD of Britney Spears' Greatest Hits."

"And a partridge in a pear tree."

"So what shall we do with all this junk?" Xaldin asked, scratching his chin in deep thought.

"Isn't it obvious?" Lexaeus replied.

Thirty seconds later the Silent Hero tore open a massive hole in the wall with his tomahawk and they put their findings in a proper waste receptacle.

All except, of course, the partridge in a pear tree. The vase that the tree was planted in had yet another inscription on the side alluding to the mysterious Red Basin.

"*The Dark One comes in the dead of night / Red Basin in hand, he gives you a fright*", Lexaeus read as they continued down the dark corridor, hopefully on the way to a means up and out of the basement.

"The most frightening thing we've encountered so far is this poetry," Xaldin snorted, and tucked the Nalgene bottle into his coat (group consensus had decided that you never know when you might get hungry for some Goldfish crackers). "What *clever* rhymes."

"What is this Red Basin they keep alluding to?" Vexen grumbled, as though trying to work out the problem in his head.

"Whatever it is, we have to find it to unlock the door upstairs," Lexaeus sighed. "The guidebook isn't picking up any sort of signals to an exit. I suppose we'll just have to keep along this tunnel until we find one."

"Why don't we just blow a hole in the ceiling like we did five paragraphs ago and be done with it?" Vexen asked irritably.

"Nine pages," Xaldin shrugged. "And plot consistency."

It was seven-thirty.

Zexy-poo lay on his back in a piping hot bath, drenched in suds and mineral oils and incense fumes with cucumbers over his eyes. Spooky music played in the background as he relaxed, in the midst of yet another particularly rigorous session of brooding.

"So my trap door has been activated," Zexy-poo cackled to no one in particular. "That means that the Dark One has awakened to do my bidding... Hahahahahah."

He lifted one foot out of the water, curling his toes luxuriously and inhaling a deep breath of citrus-ginseng bath beads.

"No one has ever survived against the Dark One!" Granted, no one had ever really *tried* to survive against the Dark One, but that meant the odds were a hundred percent in Zexy-poo's favor. He knew he did the right thing in creating that Gutless. Yes... the Dark One was truly a masterpiece of you know-lacking technology. So meek and unassuming... until it utterly destroyed you. The Superior would surely congratulate Zexy-poo on his efforts this time.

Oh, and if only the rest of the Orgy IX were still alive to see it... yes... how they would PAY for what they had said to him! What they'd done! How they had laughed in his face and made fun of his...

The crease of a frown formed on Zexy-poo's brow. No... now was not the time for that. At nine o'clock, after House, he could feel sorry for himself all he liked.

But maybe even that would be put on hold tonight... if the Dark One lived up to expectations.

"The Dark One will rend all my enemies asunder. Even those pesky Nobodies," Zexy-poo smirked, and reclined against the back of the tub luxuriously. "Oh, the mirth I will feel upon seeing their blood-spattered bodies, crushed by the wrath of the Dark One!"

"BWAAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHAA!"

"**DEMYKINS!**"

"Whaaaaaat?"

"WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT BATHTIME?"

"It's... um... wait a minute... on the tip of my tummy..."

"BATHTIME IS MY PRIVATE TIME TO BE ALONE WITH MY DARK BROODING EVIL THOUGHTS!"

"Oh, right! HAHAAHAA, sorry about that! I got bored looking for the crayons and then there was this hamster and he told me that you had a dream of a night in the deepest love and MY HEART WILL GO OOOON AAAAND OOOOOON!"

"Loving overlady of the Gutless!" Zexy-poo cursed dramatically, pulling off his mask and glaring furiously at his comrade. "*What* do I have to *do* to get you to **leave me alone?**"

Demykins grinned and burst into song. "I would fly you to the moon and back, if you'll be... if you'll BEEE MY BAABYYYYY!"

"I DON'T LISTEN TO SAVAGE GARDEN!"

"HOO-HAH!"

"GET OUT! TAKE MY UNDERPANTS OFF YOUR HEAD AND GET OUT OF HERE!"

"WHEEE!"

"GO AWAY! YOU'RE A CREEP! I WAS HAVING A GOOD TIME UNTIL YOU SHOWED UP, DEMYKINS! UUUUGH! GO HAVE SOME **COFFEE!** WITH **CREAM!** OR **SOMETHING!**"

Wibbling, Demykins removed Zexy-poo's briefs from his head and sulked out of the room, turning back just before leaving and glaring at his comrade with a pouty face.

"What?" Zexy-poo snapped.

"YOUR INCENSE STINKS AND YOU LISTEN TO STUPID MUSIC!" Demykins squealed, then slammed the door and ran off to the closet that had been designated his room.

Or he would have, rather, had he not tripped into the precise trap door that our three heroes had fallen down only pages earlier, tumbling all the way down into the basement with a shriek.

In the shadows, he crept.

He thirsted for the blood of the guilty. He could smell the weight of their crimes crushing their spirits, and it was the scent of their sorrow that drove him out of his slumber and back out to walk the world, a harvester of the wicked and the punisher of the sinful.

He was the one who held them accountable for all they had done. He was justice. He was the one force in this corrupted world that stood only to reap what had been sown.

He watched them from the shadows, driven mad by the scent. He could hear the

voice of the Master urging him on, telling him to follow them, punish them, destroy them.

They had upset Master. A most despicable crime. And now, they would suffer.

Slowly, the creature rose from his rusted, decrepit throne. His joint creaked and shook like those of an old man, like a statue coming to life from centuries of slumber. His bloodstained hands tightened around the cleaver he carried, and his head bobbed back and forth under the weight of his headpiece—a reminder of his own punishment, a symbol of the guilt he was to eliminate.

The cleaver dragged against the floor behind him as he stumbled his first steps, careful steps towards the dim light of the hallway corridor and out of his lair. There, just beyond and into the light, were the three he was to destroy. They were waiting for him... he mustn't waste time. Master would be angry if the three went unpunished.

Slowly, the creature made his way down the steps and toward the door. The cleaver banged and scraped against the stone floor, but he remained silent. He mustn't speak. Only the guilty could speak, and not for long as he followed them... they would soon be destroyed.

He pushed the door open with one weary hand, taking the first shuddering steps out into the hallway...

Then his helmet got caught in the doorframe and he fell over backwards like a disoriented turtle, flailing helplessly in the shadows.

"Did anybody hear a sound rather like some horrible creature falling over on its way to come and kill us?" Xaldin asked a fair question.

"I'm not sure," Lexaeus replied. "But I certainly heard something."

"Forget it," Vexen said, sounding more pleasant than he had all chapter. "I see a stairwell ahead. We're almost out of this logic-defying hellhole."

"But what about the Red Basin, Vexen?" Lexaeus asked as the three of them rushed towards the stairs. "We'll need it to get past that locked door."

"At this rate, I think a try of your tomahawk on the stupid thing will be entirely

worth the effort," Xaldin told him.

"Or, you know, one of the two of us could just freeze or form stone into the shape of the indentation," Vexen added.

"And why couldn't we have thought of this before?" Lexaeus rolled his eyes.

"Plot consistency," Xaldin shrugged.

Just as the trio mounted the stairs and made their way up to the open the door at the top, the basement echoed with the terrifying sound of a woman's scream. In the second's distraction, a steel slab slid across the door to block their exit.

"Oh hell," Lexaeus groaned. "Now what?"

"It couldn't possibly be some kind of horrifying monster appearing from the shadows to seal our doom in an attempt to protect its Seme master, could it?" Xaldin pondered out loud.

"Xaldin, remember that discussion we had about not saying really ironic things like that, because they always end up coming true?" Vexen asked him, for lack of a better word, vexed.

Sure enough, from the shadows of a doorway at the far end of the corridor, a tall, dark and shadowy figure was very carefully extricating itself from the doorframe. It dragged behind it a long, razor-sharp rusted cleaver—still more than capable of lopping the heads off any unsuspecting passers-by in need of punishment. Silently, the shadow stepped out of the doorway and into the light...

It was in the shape of a pale man in a stained toga, the Gutless symbol standing proudly on his chest. His hands and feet were covered in what appeared to be blood-red nail polish, but was *also* actually magic marker. And upon his head, concealing his face and weighing him down as though in punishment was a tremendous, red-stained metal bucket.

"Oh, look. A Red Basin," Xaldin pointed out casually.

Bucket Head was silent as he danced a little jig and wobbled on his feet, slowly heading in the direction of our three heroes with murder in his eyes. Well, not in his eyes... in the bucket, I suppose you'd have to say. Unfortunately, whoever designed a monster with a gigantic bucket on its head did not put much thought into how this monster would be able to walk, much less hunt down and murder the guilty. The

creature took two steps forward, tripped on a piece of rubble, and fell face-first into a pool of tepid basement water.

The three Nobodies watched him struggling to stand up for a moment, then glanced at each other.

"Oh this is just *sad*," Xaldin lamented. "Even Jeffiroth lasted at least a minute or two."

"**JEFFIROTH!**" screamed the choir from chapter five.

"Is this supposed to be our terrifying challenge for this world?" Vexen asked, once the startle from the sudden reappearance of the choir had worn off.

"Maybe we ought to... I don't know. Help him up?" Lexaeus asked uneasily.

"Why don't we just spare him the embarrassment, take the bucket off his head, and get out of here without another word or even mentioning the incident?" Xaldin suggested.

"Sounds fine to me," Vexen rolled his eyes.

The three of them made their way carefully down the stairs and slowly approached the struggling Bucket Head on the ground. Vexen and Lexaeus drew their weapons just in case, and Xaldin slowly reached down and plucked the bucket off of the monster's shoulders. As the bucket came away, light fell on the face and it revealed something horrible beyond all reason...

Up in the Seme's loft, Zexy-poo was ten seconds away from a murderous rampage.

He stood, holding an empty cardboard carton marked with a huge black skull and crossbones bumper sticker. The seal had been broken and every last fishy cracker had been devoured.

Zexy-poo crushed the carton underfoot, clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white, and screamed in utter rage.

"THAT IDIOT **ATE** THE DARK ONE!" he shrieked.

"Oh **hell**."

"OWIEEE I'VE BEEN STUCK IN THIS THING FOR AN HOOUUUUR!" Demykins whined, rolling back and forth in the puddle and immensely glad to finally be free of the bucket.

"We have had ridiculous cliffhangers before," Vexen said in a very dark sort of voice. "But this? Was the stupidest, least-compelling and most idiotic cliffhanger I've ever seen."

"I hate it when that happens!" Demykins cursed, sitting up and rubbing his head. "I come down in the basement, lookin' for a good time, go diggin' in a closet, Bob's your uncle, I got me a bucket on my head, right down Davy Jones, eh, wot? Went lookin' for me cleaver got me a rusty hatchet in the eyeball y'know what I mean? WOOHOOOO! LLAMA-FACE!"

"Honestly, I think we're glad to have found you, Demykins," Xaldin said, drawing up several of his lances out of thin air. "We'll have to deal with you sooner or later, and there's no time like the present, is there?"

"Whoa man," Demykins' eyes widened, and he crawled backwards and away from the trio staring at him with malice and ill-intentions. "Hey now! We don't gotta end it all violently! All we are saying is give peas a chance!"

"I apologize Seme, but you were never meant to exist," Lexaeus hefted his tomahawk over his shoulder and broke the news in as gentle a tone as was probably possible. "You are only a piece of an incomplete whole. We must restore you back into Demyx's body where you belong."

"YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALIVE, BEEFCAKE!" Demykins screeched and did some kind of clumsy backflip, leaping to his feet and holding the cleaver up over his head. "FOR THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE!"

"You got *that* right," Vexen growled, preparing his shield.

"HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERE WE ARE! BOOORN TO BE KINGS, WE'RE THE PRINCESS OF THE UNIVEEEEERSE!" Demykins burst into song, and the cleaver was engulfed in an evil light as it began to change shape. "PREPARE YOURSELVES! Demykins' Super Seme Ultra Double Dynamite Loopy-Doo Luau Attack!"

The three Nobodies braced themselves as Demykins seemed to be preparing for an immensely powerful attack, with all sorts of fancy dance moves, dramatic sweeps

of the hand and the occasional explosion of sparkles. The cleaver continued to twist and bend and change shape before him, until finally he snatched it out of the air and...

"Oh we're GOIN'! TO A HOOKY-LAU! Hooky-hooky-hooky-hooky hooky-lau! Hooky-lau-lau-lau!" Demykins strummed out a tune on his brand new ukulele.

"This is impossible. It's like killing a caffeinated improv comic," Vexen groaned.

"Hey, do you guys have any fishy crackers?" Demykins asked quite suddenly.

There was a long pause.

"As a matter of fact, we do," Xaldin reached into his coat and pulled out the Nalgene bottle, shaking it up to the light to show off the glistening crackers inside.

Demykins' jaw dropped and his tongue fell out the side, drooling profusely. "OH EM GEE. THOSE ARE MY FAVORITES, YO."

"Would you like some?" Xaldin asked him, eyeing Vexen and Lexaeus in a terribly obvious tone.

"YES YES YES PLZ PLZ PLZ OMG!" Demykins squealed, hopping up and down excitedly.

"Let us pour them in a bowl for you," Lexaeus offered, and pulled out the Tupperware. He very carefully opened the lid, wary not to let any of the four you knows inside drift out and into the open. Vexen took a handful of crackers from Xaldin and sprinkled them liberally within the container.

"HA!" Demykins shrieked, "YOU THINK I AM STUPID! You three think I am so stupid, eh wot? That trick is so OBVIOUS! You think I am so stupid? I know I'm too big to fit in that little Tupperware dish there!"

"So you are," Xaldin acknowledged.

"You think you're so smart! HAAAAHA! Well, I have FOOLED YOU!" Demykins cackled triumphantly. "I will have my fishy crackers AND I will not fall for your stupid trick! Watch THIS!"

Pulling a dramatic ballerina pirouette into the air, Demykins exploded in a burst of light and all that was left of him was a floating, wispy orb of you know. It jumped

and wiggled excitedly, then zipped immediately into the Tupperware to partake in the delicious Goldfish, the baked and not fried Goldfish, the wholesome snack that smiles back until you bite their heads off.

It took Demyx's you know approximately ten seconds to somehow figure out that it now had no mouth and was no longer capable of eating fishy crackers, but that was far after Lexaeus sealed the Tupperware lid, trapping the you knows inside until the time they could be returned to their proper owners.

"Really now. That was pathetic," Vexen rolled his eyes.

"I certainly hope Zexion's Seme will put up a little more of a fight than that," Xaldin chuckled, shaking his head. "Speaking of which, we've got our Red Basin. Let's get up to his loft and show him we mean business, shall we?"

"Let's," Lexaeus smirked. "Pass the Goldfish, Xaldin."

"They are delicious, aren't they?" Xaldin replied.

"Yes. And so wholesome. Mothers can rest easy with Goldfish," even Vexen was inclined to agree. "Much better than that disgusting sugary... what's-it-called."

Xaldin tucked the Red Basin under his arm as the three of them made their way to the door. "You know, Vexen, for a moment there I was almost sure the Bucket Head would be some kind of evil sentient cake."

"*That* was uncalled for."

One trek up the stairs and satisfying unlocking of the chamber door later, Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus could faintly detect the sound of dramatic, melancholy music blasting through the door to Zexy-poo's chamber straight ahead of them.

"I WANNA STAND WITH YOU ON A MOUNTAIN! I WANNA BATHE WITH YOU IN THE SEEEEA "

"He listens to Savage Garden?" Lexaeus smirked, holding back a bit of laughter.

"I think it's high time we put him out of his misery, gentlemen," Xaldin said. "On the count of three?"

"One," Vexen called out.

"Two," Lexaeus added.

"And three—"

And with that, the three of them kicked in the double doors, drawing their weapons and standing posed in the doorway like they were having their pictures taken for the official game art.

"Zexion! We've come to take you home!" Lexaeus called gruffly.

There was the sudden scratch of a CD and a noise that sounded rather like a Seme throwing his stereo into a bathtub with an electrical sizzle and a small explosion. "WHAT HAVE I SAID ABOUT KNOCKING ON MY DOOR!"

The trio watched as Zexy-poo emerged from behind the bathtub and they caught their first glimpse of him. He still looked quite a bit like his usual self—if his usual self had spent six hours in the bathroom with a black eyeliner pencil and pale makeup. His hair was stringy, unwashed and combed into his face, and he wore a dramatic Hot Topic ensemble of a pair of pants with ten suspenders and six sets of chains hanging off them in every direction, topped off with a corset.

"Oh *gag*," Vexen groaned.

"What is there to gag at?" asked Xaldin.

"*Pick* something," Vexen replied, "But I was mostly referring to the fact that he's eight years old."

"I AM NOT EIGHT YEARS OLD!" shrieked Zexy-poo, standing at about four foot six and exceptionally skinny and underdeveloped—much like you would expect an eight-year-old to be. "Nobody EVER understands me! All the rest of the Orgy made FUN of me... and called me a CHILD... and said I couldn't DO anything... but now I'm one of the only ones left! They all PAID for misunderstanding me... and YOU don't understand me either!"

"You're probably correct in that assumption," Lexaeus called. "But regardless, the time has come for us to destroy you and take you with us. My good friend Zexion will be missing his... you know."

"Puh!" Zexy-poo cackled, crossing his arms over his chest. "Like I CARE! Hasn't

anyone ever asked me what I thought about it! If I WANT to go back to him? What if I LIKE having a life of my own and ruling the world and brooding six hours a day? WHY DOESN'T ANYBODY CARE WHAT I THINK?"

"It's probably the fact that you're a being comprised of a missing set of... you know," Xaldin said quite honestly. "And you might as well get used to the fact—we Nobodies *don't* generally care what other people think."

"Well then," Zexy-poo narrowed his eyes, and an evil red glow shone from them in the dim light of the room. "If that's the way it is, I'll just have to teach you all a lesson!"

With a mighty explosion of darkness and a blast of emo music (go ahead and pick a band, the author supposes she has been mean enough this chapter), Zexy-poo leapt off the floor and was soon floating in midair, hair sticking straight up behind him and waves of some evil power swirling beneath him on the floor. The force of the explosion knocked the bathtub, the end table and all the furniture in the room over to the side. The Nobodies braced themselves on the slick stone tile and prepared for what would no doubt be an epic battle. The author owed the readers one since all the cliffhangers and suspense this chapter ended up as stupid jokes.

"What are you all fighting me for?" Zexy-poo yelled over the roar of evil, pointing his hands downward at the floor and grasping as though reaching for some kind of invisible strings. "You all have *so much* to feel sorry for yourselves about!"

"The only reason *I* feel sorry for myself is that I have to put up with idiots like you in the course of my duty!" Xaldin retorted sharply.

"Oh really?" Zexy-poo tightened his hand around something and then jerked upwards. A dark shadow rose from the floor as though he were controlling it like a puppet. Slowly, the shadow took shape—it gained a human form, arms, legs, a long black coat, a hundred thin braids whipping in the gale, and—

"EVERYBODY CALLS THEM *DREADLOCKS*," an immensely scrawny, whiny and basically grotesque version of Xaldin screeched the moment it had been fully brought into existence. "But they're not *DREADLOCKS*. They're *BRAIDS*. Do you know what you have to *DO* to your hair to get d-d-d-DREADLOOOOCKS! AAAAGGGGGH!"

"What in the name of—" Xaldin gaped, stepping back away from this emo replica of himself.

"EVERYBODY MAKES FUN OF MY SIDEBURNS," the Xaldin Shadow wibbled, clasping his hands over his eyes and sobbing heartily. "BUT THEY'RE GENEETIIIC! MY MEEMAW WAS A SWARTHY WOMAN WITH BIG SIDEBURNS AND MY POOPAW HAD THEM TOOOOOOOOO!"

Taking extreme offense at this, Xaldin snarled and lunged forward, three lances shooting out from behind him to destroy this deplorable thing. The blades passed straight through the Shadow, however, and only served to intensify his whining.

"AND NOW YOU'RE TRYING TO KILL ME!" the Xaldin Shadow sobbed. "WAAAAAAAH!"

"Ahahahahahahah!" Zexy-poo howled with laughter and clasped at two more invisible strings, drawing up from the floor two shadows that quickly manifested themselves into the forms of the other two Organization members before him.

"EVERYBODY THINKS I'M STUPID BECAUSE I'M MUSCULAAAAR," wailed the Lexaeus Shadow, curled up in the fetal position. "NOBODY UNDERSTAAAANDS ME! I DON'T HAVE A HEAAAAART! I'M JUST A BIG LUNK OF MUSCLLLLLLE! WAAAAAH!"

"Oh honestly," Lexaeus rolled his eyes—his attempts to destroy the Shadow also proved futile.

Meanwhile, Vexen's Shadow was having quite an episode of his own.

"NOBODY UNDERSTANDS WHY IT SCARES ME! IT-IT-IT'S SOFT AND SQUISHY AND SWEET AND CREAMY A-A-AND AAGGGGH! I JUST... I HATE... HATE... HATE... HAAAAAAATE CAKE!"

Vexen sighed heavily, buried his face in his hand, and swore swift, terrible revenge on the author.

"BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Zexy-poo was rather enjoying his little puppet show, waving his hands to orchestrate the movement of the shadows. "Don't you SEE? EVERYBODY has something to whine about! EVERYBODY can be like me—LIVING in the darkness! MOPING! SOBBING! ANGSTING! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! EVERYONE WILL FEEL SORRY FOR THEMSELVES! When I am the ONLY member left of Orgy IX, ALL of Fandom Hearts will bow to my angsty will! They will ALL look as these Shadows do- and that CERTAINLY includes you, you pesky pests! AHAHAHAHAHHAA!"

"I don't *think* so," Vexen growled, glaring at the prepubescent Seme.

"And just HOW do you think you can stop me?" Zexy-poo laughed hysterically, fully caught up in his evil moment.

"Like this," Lexaeus said casually.

Zexy-poo looking up suddenly, just in time to see Lexaeus' tomahawk flying through the air, spinning end over end directly in his direction. "BWA—"

But the Seme was too late to dodge it. The tomahawk struck him, he flew backwards and slammed into the wall, and the tomahawk embedded itself in the steel girder behind him, effectively pinning Zexy-poo in place. The darkness in the room and the Shadows vanished, as Zexy-poo let out an ear-splitting shriek of "OWWWWW!"

"*Thank* you, Lexaeus," Xaldin sighed in relief, the corner of his lip still twitching in fury at his Shadow depiction.

"You're welcome," Lexaeus replied, strolling towards Zexy-poo with his arms crossed.

"OWWWWW! MY BROKEN SOUL!" Zexy-poo screamed in pain, wriggling helplessly to escape his rather gruesome-looking predicament. "Y-Y-Y-YOU HURT ME! HOW COULD YOU—"

"Oh *stop* it," Vexen groaned, "You don't have any internal organs, you little twerp. That oughtn't to hurt you at all."

Zexy-poo's eyes watered and he buried his face in his hands. "NOBODY UNDERSTANDS ME! NOBODY! WAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Now listen here, you twit," Xaldin snapped, as the three Nobodies circled their immobilized enemy. "Angst is all well and good in moderation, but let us remind you of one very *simple*, very *important* fact."

"You are a character in *Kingdom Hearts*," Vexen enunciated. "Which is partially owned by *Disney*."

"Therefore, there is *honestly* a little threshold to the possible amount of pissy, whiny angst you can exude at *any* given time," Lexaeus finished.

"YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT TO TELL ME THAT!" Zexy-poo protested, kicking his feet wildly. "YOU'RE OPPRESSING ME!"

"Boy, this series features *Donald Duck* as a main character," Xaldin placed a hand on his forehead as though he was developing a headache. "*Donald. Duck.* If you *really* feel the need to exercise your pubescent turmoil through the art of overwhelmingly suicidal, depressing, wrist-cutting angsty prose, why don't you turn your hand to something a little more suited to it? *Silent Hill*, perhaps?"

There was a short pause.

"What's Silent Hill?" sniffled Zexy-poo, wiping his nose on the back of his sleeve.

There was a *long* pause.

All three of the Nobodies opened their mouths as though to say something, then closed them. Then opened them. Then closed them again.

"Have you *been* in your own basement?" asked Lexaeus in disbelief.

"I have a *basement*?" Zexy-poo's eyes widened in shock.

"Oh *enough*," Xaldin rolled his eyes and held up one of his lances. "Hold still and let's get it over with."

"WAIT!" Zexy-poo screamed, "I AM ALLOWED A DRAMATIC DEATH SCENE!"

"Make it quick," Vexen snapped.

"LOOOONG AGO! LIKE THE HEARSE YOU DIED TO GET IN A-" Zexy-poo suddenly burst into song.

"NONE OF THAT!" all three Nobodies yelled in unison.

"Oh fine," Zexy-poo huffed. "I KNEW I LOOOVED YOU BEFORE I-"

With that, Xaldin abruptly stabbed him below the belt and with a high-pitched screech of horror, Zexy-poo exploded into purple mist and the usual glowing orb. Lexaeus gently coaxed it in with the other five, and there was a tense moment of silence, punctuated by three large sighs.

"That little dope listened to Savage Garden," Vexen grinned slightly.

Lexaeus gently shook the Tupperware, watching the you knows swirling about inside. "In that case, let's just presume to have done him a favor."

"I hope no one has failed to realize that there are only two members of the Organization still missing in action," Lexaeus said a few hours later, as our three heroes had returned to the G.S. Existentialist and fled Vacillation Heights as fast as their engines could take them. They were now seated in the ship's combination cockpit and lounge, partaking in a fresh batch of Goldfish crackers—like they were *really* gonna eat the ones in the Tupperware?

"And moreover, the significance in their numbers," Vexen added, carefully adding to his notes of the journey from recorded observations on the guidebook's computer. "Number One and Number Thirteen."

"I have a feeling this is no ordinary world we're coming up on," Xaldin was gazing out the front transparencies of the ship, his voice grave despite the successful outlook of the mission so far. "No doubt the Semes of the Superior and Roxas will not be the same sort we are used to, either. We must be prepared for *anything*."

"Aren't we always?" Lexaeus asked optimistically.

Xaldin smirked slightly, eyes still focused somewhere distant out in the vast reaches of space. "Finally, we will see exactly who this Grand Master Fangirl is, and what the heart of her wicked plan has to do with us. It will no doubt be very... interesting."

"Honestly," Vexen rolled his eyes. "For the most part, this entire journey has been a giant joke. Ruined cliffhangers, pathetic creatures to fight... certain pastries aside, I'm not nervous in the least."

"We must have confidence, after all," Lexaeus agreed.

"But be careful not to get too cocky, gentlemen," Xaldin warned them, crossing his arms and focusing his attention on a bleeping dot just ahead of them on the radar—a new world, and an exceptionally large one, for that matter. "After all... who are we to know what lurks beyond chapter nine?"

"Probably something exceptionally stupid," Vexen shrugged.

"... well, that's a given," Xaldin rolled his eyes.

Hundreds of thousands of miles away, in the far reaches of space on the far side of the alternate universe, the Darkest Tower in Fandom Hearts was echoing with the sounds of laughter.

"Chapter nine is complete," the sinister man in some color besides black cackled maniacally, lacing his fingers together. "The puppets are out of the way, and now the little heroes are on their way here... It is almost time for the show to begin!"

He leaned against some complicated computer equipment on the tower's control program, hardly able to contain his sinister laughter. His evil was overwhelming him. He had to express it somehow, lest he explode in a great supernova of wickedness before the final stages of his plan could even be set into motion.

"Yes, yes..." he howled, "They think they are so clever! I can just imagine them, aboard their little ship, speaking of how easy it's all been... well, little do they know what awaits him in THE FINAL WORLD!"

The man clenched his eyes shut, shaking his head and smacking the instrument panel in the throes of hilarity.

"Soon," he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes and gazed across the room, where Roxas lay strapped to the slab, still sleeping peacefully, "Soon, my boy, you will awaken to your full potential... soon, you will realize your destiny as the centerpiece to our magnificent plan. And soon, all the worlds in all the universe will have *you* to thank when they all bow to the Gutless and the magnificence of their eternal rule! AHAHAHAHAHAAA! AH-AH-AH-"

The man suddenly passed out, having choked on a little spit in the back of his mouth.

Two minutes later he stumbled to his feet again, still fighting back hysterical giggles.

"Soon, my plan will come to fruition. Soon, the Grand Master Fangirl will have her glory," he mumbled, a wide, evil grin playing on his lips. "And soon, those three Nobodies will be on their knees before me, begging for mercy, and I will rend them asunder, finally implementing them into our plan, as was intended from the very beginning! Soon, they will arrive with the you knows... and Orgy IX will stand complete again!"

Taking a break for one last peal of gasping, desperate laughter, he paused, then gazed dramatically out the window.

"Soon," Xemnas' Seme whispered, traces of a grin still on his face. "They will all come to know the wrath... of MANSEX."

Across the room, Roxas was dreaming. He'd just been drafted into Major League Baseball and now there were cheerleaders swarming all around him, begging for his autograph.

The corners of his mouth curled into a dazed smile as he slept, securely bolted down to a slab in the dankest corner in the deepest room of the darkest tower in Fandom Hearts.

Wow, I'm sorry that chapter took so long. My world has been a big confusing mess of activity and social life lately (how rare!) including my only con (go ahead and laugh) and a fellow Org VI crony coming out to visit me (say hi to Xelz, everyone!). But hey, chapter's done, now I can be lazy again for a week or so.

We are nearing the climax! OMG! I can't promise anything with regards to number of chapters, but wouldn't it be great if I managed thirteen? So... meaningful.

Anyhoo, everybody have a nice day. Or Bucket Head will come for you in the night and get his head caught on the doorframe. Try getting him out when he's REALLY wedged in there.

Special thanks to Raina, Yamiko, Lynx, Gext and Xelz for prereading this chapter for me at all different stages of its month-long prenatal period.

Princes of the Universe

Chapter Ten: Princes of the Universe

Gather around, children, and Gramma will tell you a story in her very best Goody Gumdrop voice—but this is no ordinary story. This ain't your average, everyday Big Bad Wolf fairytale. No, no... It is a story about days long past and legends lost to the corridors of time. It is a story that will bring meaning to your pitiful prepubescent lives and shake you to your very core. Have you all used the restroom? If not, go do it right now because I'm not going to stop and wait for you to go potty halfway through it. I will tell this story right over your little bathroom break, Junior. Don't you look at me like that, I don't have all the time in the world. Murder, She Wrote is on in twenty minutes and you can bet I like Jessica Fletcher a lot better than I like you, you snot-nosed little brat.

There now. Are you seated comfortably? Got yourself a snack? Is it something healthy, like fruit, and not this twice-fried sugar-crusted cheesy cracker nonsense? Good. Then let us begin.

Once upon a time there were stories. Many, many stories about many different events in many different places, starring many different people. They told these stories in many different ways—sometimes, gathered around a campfire in the dark woods in the far-off mountains and forests. Sometimes they wrote them down and put them out in books for people to read. Sometimes they hired overpaid shlubs to act out the stories onstage or in a movie—or, like Jessica Fletcher did, a television program. And sometimes they would spend months and years, even, animating these stories into computer programs, including some sort of play mechanic and producing them on these newfangled contraptions called "video games".

Now, in Gramma's day, we didn't have these "Playstations" and "Xboxes" that you kids always jabber on about. No, no, there was only ONE "video game system" that you could own without being a hopeless nerd, and it was NINTENDO! All the games were based on movies, or crazy hallucinations by The Father of All Gaming, who happened to be a Japanese man with a magical land in his brain that prints out money. We didn't have "strategy guides" or "FAQ websites", either! All we had was our brains and a piece of paper to scribble down things like "EASTMOST PENINSULA HOLDS THE SECRET" and "DODONGO DISLIKES SMOKE" in the hopes that ten hours from now, when we were ripping our hair out and throwing our little blocky controllers at the wall in frustration, those little bits of gibberish might

unlock some kind of amazing epiphany to drag us out of our hellhole!

But, um... where was I?

Stories. Yes. Now, people heard these stories and they liked them very much. These stories inspired people to write their own stories, and they wanted to share these new stories with the world! One day, Al Gore invented something that would allow them to do this—the internet. Soon, websites all across the internet were flooded with stories about other stories (in between the porn)—and it was good. There were so many stories that it was getting difficult to keep track of! And so the stories divided themselves up by what they were about—into little universes called "fandoms".

One of the most popular fandoms was called "Kingdom Hearts". It was all about a videogame starring a doofy kid in giant shoes who ran around with cartoon characters getting smacked in the face with things like DOORS and DARKNESS and LIGHT. All of the Kingdom Hearts stories came together and became Fandom Hearts, which took its place alongside the original story—known as the "Canon Universe". The two universes coexisted peacefully, and it was good.

There was a world in Fandom Hearts, and in that world resided a young woman we will call the Grand Master Fangirl. This particular world was her special place. She built a factory on this world to make new ideas for her stories. Many characters came to her world to help her run the factory. Each day the factory would produce new ideas for her stories, and she would write them, and it was good.

One day, as is quite common with thirteen-year-old girls like her, the Grand Master Fangirl's thoughts turned to flights of fancy—romance. The factory began producing ideas for her new stories, but one day something happened that nobody could have expected...

The idea that came out of the factory that day was not a good idea. It was shriveled, sickly, weak, worm-like and basically looked as though it had seen better days. They did not know what to do with this unfortunate little idea—the Grand Master Fangirl did not want to throw it out, as it was her own creation and in a way it was soooooo cute. So, she decided that from this day forward she would follow a credo and accept any idea that came out of the factory, no matter how pale and sickly and gross it was. Everything deserved a chance at life.

It was unfortunate for the Grand Master Fangirl that this sickly little idea was not any ordinary idea—it was a being that lacked a brain, a heart, a spine and most importantly, it lacked... you know. This was the very first Gutless. And it began to

spread its parasite all throughout the factory. Soon, all of the ideas that the factory produced were transformed into Gutless. Soon, the entire world and the Grand Master Fangirl herself became corrupted by the Gutless scourge, and soon they began to plot a way to transform the rest of Fandom Hearts—no, the rest of the entire universe—ALL universes...

They would all become a part of the Grand Master Fangirl's Gutless Empire, and she would rule them all with an iron fist.

In the World That Never Was, in the main meeting room of the Nobodies' castle, there was a highly advanced computer that the Organization used to keep in contact with all of its members, Nobody underlings and gummi craft. It could detect distress signals from millions upon millions of miles away, no matter the world or dimension the signal would be coming from. It was a state-of-the-art piece of technology that had proved invaluable to the smooth operations of the Organization for countless years.

A red button was flashing on the control panel. The monitor zoomed in to show an obscure corner of Fandom Hearts, and a great bright world that was blinking like a star in the blackness of space.

"Number Eight! Number Eight! Do you read me?" Lexaeus' voice crackled over the radio. "Number Eight, this is Number Five! We are in need of reinforcements. Do you read me? Send reinforcements! Axel?"

Silence.

"Axel...?"

More silence.

"AXEL!"

The signal shut off.

Unfortunately, no matter how advanced the computer, it cannot efficiently send messages if the receiver cannot hear it.

The Darkest Tower in Fandom Hearts was usually an uneventful and desolate

place. It stood a monument to the wicked, abandoned as a wasteland and silent as a grave.

Tonight, however, it was anything but.

The normally abandoned streets outside the Darkest Tower were crawling with bodies—not the bodies of the living, though. No, this mob of shadowy figures that pushed and shoved into an ocean of beings outside the tower's doors were quite obviously not human—or Nobody, for that matter. Their faces were pale, their bodies skinny and wispy like the slightest poke would break their brittle bones, their hair long and unkempt flowing behind them like capes. Their fragile and bony hands were outstretched above them and from their throats came long, guttural moans like the sound of a dying man who has just been kicked in the squish.

And the normal silence that covered the building like a blanket was shattered and stomped to pieces by the birth of an intense battle somewhere within the tower. Then all sound was cut off by maniacal laughter and the sound of some loud doomsday device turning on.

"Oh son of a BITCH!" Xaldin yelled.

Then there was a supersonic explosion, a great flash of light—

Then silence.

Pretentious out-of-sequence chapter openings aside, the author is sure you are all on the edges of your chairs worrying about what could possibly be happening in the paragraphs above. *What does it all mean?*, you may ask yourself. *What battle have I come into the middle of? What sort of horrible surprises could the final world hold? Do these pants make my butt look big?*

To find the answers to these questions (aside from the pants thing), we must turn back the clock and the pages to the beginning of this debacle, to the moment our three heroes first disembarked from the G.S. Existentialist on the surface of the final world, got their bearings and set off to follow the unmistakable signals that pointed them to one Seme and one Nobody in a distant corner of the world.

"We have disembarked from the G.S. Existentialist. I've gotten our bearings," Lexaeus announced. "Let's set off to follow these two signals—they're unmistakable. One is a Seme and one is still a Nobody, both off in a distant corner of the world."

Vexen and Xaldin stared at him.

The Silent Hero frowned and folded the world guidebook under his arm. "*What?*"

"You're repeating the prose," Xaldin informed him.

"I am?" Lexaeus looked horrified.

"Oh for darkness' sake," Vexen groaned, and shoved both his companions into walking. "Let's just get this over with already. I fear what may happen if the three of us spend any more time in this hellhole Fandom Universe than is necessary."

"What does the guidebook say about this world, Lexaeus?" Xaldin asked him, determined not to let Vexen drag them into the La Brea tar pits of disgust and snooty elitism for the remainder of the chapter.

"Nothing, yet," Lexaeus replied. "We've got the two signals coming up on the radar, but other than that it hasn't made a peep."

"Well, we do have our observations," Xaldin said. He glanced up at the sky, pitch black as midnight and strangely without even a single star to poke light through the darkness. "The wind is cold as far as I can detect it—as though this world is eternally dark. There doesn't seem to be any kind of sun."

"And the earth is echoing the footsteps of millions of people not too far from here," Lexaeus added. "Some kind of city, I'd guess."

"A city entombed in eternal darkness," Vexen repeated. "My, doesn't *that* sound familiar?"

"Quite," Xaldin agreed. "The shipboard computer did show this world to be massive in comparison to the others we've visited... we've got to stay on our guard at all times and be prepared for anything. We are far too late in the game to lose one of us to the Gutless now."

"Even so, I suggest we move quickly," Lexaeus murmured. "I've got the guidebook trying to figure out exactly what the residents of the world are if not humans. There is no other way for us to find out but to get closer."

An hour or so later, our three heroes were arriving at the outskirts of an absolutely massive city perched in the valley up against great silver mountains that rose high into the black sky. If there was such a thing as Earth in their universe, the

trio might have described the metropolis before them as some sort of pseudo-Las Vegas. The buildings gleamed and sparkled, glowing with neon lights in every color of the rainbow. Tremendous flashing signs advertised normal commodities—restaurants, bars, dance halls, a bowling alley and what appeared to be several casinos. The city appeared to stretch endlessly off into the distance along the mountains, residential areas and well-lit entertainment districts reaching all the way past the foothills and right up to where Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus were walking.

"What... familiar scenery," Vexen observed.

"Let's go through the checklist," Xaldin suggested, one eyebrow raised high over the other as he examined their surroundings quizzically. "Dark skies?"

"Check," Lexaeus nodded.

"Foreboding, overly complicated architecture and/or some kind of ruins?"

"Indeed," Vexen confirmed.

"Epic-sounding technopop and/or metal music in the background?"

"Yep."

"Cryptic clues and references to the end of things, and/or excessively pretentious area names?"

"We have stepped into the Haven of Wasted Epiphanies," Vexen announced, reading from a convenient nearby sign. "Up ahead is the Village of Twisted Thoughts and the Subdivision of Broken Endings. Triple check."

"Yes. I thought so," Xaldin sighed. "This is a Final World if ever I saw one."

"It does indeed look quite a bit like The World That Never Was," Lexaeus added, tilting his head a bit as he gazed off into the distance. "Except they have a bowling alley."

"Honestly," Vexen groaned. "We come to the very most guarded and reclusive of all the worlds in Fandom Hearts and even *they* have enough forethought to put in a bowling alley. Xemnas is the worst urban planner *ever*."

"Well, somebody take a picture!" Xaldin urged them. "Even a traditionalist like

Xemnas can't argue with hard evidence. There is absolutely *no* reason why we can't build a little nightclub on the corner of the Skyscraper and the Alleyway."

Vexen snapped a quick picture with his Camera Phone of Naught, sighing and slipping it back into wherever it is the Organization keeps things. Pockets, perhaps. "In any case, there's still no signal letting us know the name or attributes of this world. We'd better figure out what the catch is before we go running off into a disastrous situation, or find ourselves stuck in the middle of one."

"That building there appears to be a tourist information center," Lexaeus gestured to a small chalet-shaped building off to one side of the road leading into the vast city below.

"And I think I see an observation tower just ahead," Xaldin pointed a short distance away from the chalet Lexaeus had mentioned. "I'll try to get a better look at the city. Lexaeus, why don't you go check in that tourist center?"

"Certainly," Lexaeus nodded and was off. "Everyone meet back here. And signal if something bad happens, yes?"

"Indeed," Vexen agreed and turned to go with Lexaeus.

"Ah, Vexen, there's a little shack across from the observation tower. Do you see it there in that alley?" Xaldin grasped his colleague by the hood and pointed to the shed in question.

Vexen blinked. "You mean those run-down, desolate, crumbling ruins of obvious disaster and peril that perhaps in life were a shed?"

"Yes, that one. Go check in there," Xaldin suggested.

"I am most certainly *not* going in there!" Vexen protested.

Xaldin looked annoyed. "Oh, why not?"

"Because it's a death-trap?"

"It is not a death-trap, Vexen," Lexaeus tried to comfort him. "What makes you think it's a death-trap?"

"I can quite clearly see the marks of an explosion on the outside of that shed," Vexen pointed out. "There are probably ten thousand rusty nails sticking out in

every corner, absolutely *crawling* with tetanus."

"We're Nobodies, Vexen," Lexaeus assured him. "We can't get tetanus."

"We *can* be impaled on a length of sharpened wood splinters, or torn limb-from-limb by horrifying Gutless monsters."

"I happen to know for a fact you could easily dispatch absolutely any sort of monster that could ever attack you, and there isn't very much within us to be impaled," Xaldin said confidently.

"I absolutely refuse on grounds of favoritism!" Vexen snapped. "Lexaeus gets to search a big, well-lit tourist center. You get an observation tower out in the open. I have to go into a darkened alley and bust my way into crumbling ruins, ninety-nine percent likely to be booby-trapped or haunted or otherwise absolutely deadly?"

"Who's playing favorites?" Lexaeus asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's HER," Vexen snarled. "She's LAUGHING at me."

"Meet you back out here, Vexen," Xaldin said with a sigh, motioning for Lexaeus to follow him towards their respective destinations.

"She is going to PAY for this!" Vexen screamed into the dark night.

"Vexen hasn't really been the same after that cake incident, has he?" Lexaeus remarked a bit wistfully to Xaldin.

"Darkness save his empty soul," Xaldin mumbled under his breath.

The tourist center seemed a little run-down and neglected, Lexaeus noted as he stepped into the lobby. The furniture and carpets were dusty and looked like they hadn't been touched in ages. The floor creaked beneath him and the lights were dimmed, some of the bulbs bare in the fixtures and some broken or burnt out. Cardboard racks holding colorful, if not a bit faded pamphlets sat at an empty counter.

Lexaeus thumbed through the pamphlets, all advertising bowling alleys and movie theaters and video arcades and other entertainment centers. He frowned jealously and placed them back in their proper racks—nothing of use.

A cheerful sign stating TOURIST INFO was nailed up above the doorframe leading into an adjacent room, the wall flickering like a fire was burning somewhere within it.

Quietly listening for any signs of life, Lexaeus approached the doorframe and tried to peer around the corner. Somebody coughed, a muffled sound.

It was odd, Lexaeus thought, that whoever owned this establishment would not be out in the lobby at the counter where he or she belonged.

Rounding the corner, Lexaeus caught sight of a long-haired blond figure kneeling down and stoking a roaring fireplace at the far end of the room. It looked to be some kind of small dining room—or even a café, as the order counter at the north end of the room seemed to suggest. It was as run-down and filthy as the rest of the building, save for a gleaming and perfectly polished mirror on a vanity placed oddly in the corner.

"Excuse me?" Lexaeus said quietly, addressing the figure before the fireplace.

It was impossible to tell if it was male or female from the back, wavy feet of cornsilk blond hair fluttering behind its skinny body like a majestic cape of some sort. The figure coughed again into its hand, tossing another log onto the fire.

"Excuse me? Sir? Ma'am?" Lexaeus repeated, stepping out into the room. "I regret barging in here when you are apparently closed, but I am in need of some information."

The figure slowly stood up, but did not turn around, simply cocking its head at Lexaeus' words but not replying.

Lexaeus stood there awkwardly for a few moments, eventually deciding that the setup of this situation could only lead to some kind of horrible revelation or even a trap—the decrepit state of the building, the eerie coughing, the shadowed figure, the silence? Lexaeus had seen plenty of horror movies and most of them started out *exactly* like this.

"... All right," Lexaeus finally said. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"Your face," the figure said in a male voice, croaky and hoarse like it had suffered from disuse or perhaps overuse, such as from high-pitched shrieking.

"Pardon?" Lexaeus asked.

"It's so... hard," the figure whispered, reaching out a thin and nearly skeletal hand for an iron hammer placed on the hearth. "H-hard and rough... let me... SOFTEN IT!"

Lexaeus took an instinctive step back and just in time, as with a horrible screech of fury the figure lunged at him, taking a swing with the hammer that, while not fatal to a Nobody, would have seriously hurt like a bitch. He dodged another strike and ended up backing into the wall behind him, reaching into nothing and tightening his hand around the handle of his tomahawk for self-defense.

As he readied his weapon, the assailant lifted himself from the floor and glanced up at Lexaeus with wide, terrible, sparkling and unnaturally large eyes.

And though he was male, his features were decisively feminine—wispy, pale, shriveled and nearly dead-looking, his hair quite easily the lushest and healthiest feature. There on his bare midriff was tattooed the symbol of the Gutless, modified to include a rather suggestively placed capital letter Y.

"Be mine, Shnookypants," the Gutless whispered, raising the hammer and flinging himself at Lexaeus.

"The wind here is odd," Xaldin mumbled to himself as he approached the observation tower. "It almost sounds like Lexaeus screaming in horror."

It also struck Xaldin how otherwise silent the wind here was. Despite the fact this was the outskirts of a city, there were no sounds—no vrooming of vivacious vehicles, perhaps Volkswagens, no vice-ridden villains such as Voldemort, or their various victims, no victorious vibrations of voices. Not even a vendetta. All he could hear was the occasional clap of thunder from the valley below, storm clouds having gathered around an exceptionally dark tower—Xaldin might have called it the darkest one he'd ever seen.

Even in the vast and abandoned Dark City on The World That Never Was, you could hear things happening at basically any time of day. There was always some kind of activity from the nexus where the Nobodies leapt in between the travel from world to world, and every once and a while the underlings down below would set up an impromptu game of Pizza Boy Pizza Boy Who Got the Pizza Boy and Devoured His Heart (it is a little known fact that Demyx, the Organization's Number IX, was once involved in this game—as the ball).

Here, it was almost as if the buildings and streets down below were merely for show, like elaborate cardboard cutouts only there to distract travelers from the heart of things—which was obviously that extremely dark tower. You just cannot ignore the obvious architecture in places like these.

The observation tower was built of steel and neon not unlike the rest of the buildings in the city, and stood on the edge of the long cliff that led down into the valley and the city proper. Xaldin stood at its base for a few minutes, keeping an eye out for any kind of suspicious activity or enemies on guard. When everything remained as eerie and silent as it had been so far, Xaldin teleported himself to the top of the tower to look around.

The wind was colder up here, carrying no sound besides the dramatic techno music. Firmly bolted to the tower's top was a set of binoculars, the sort you drop a coin into for about two minutes of blurry sightseeing through fingerprinted lenses with small children screaming in your ear that they want to see too. Luckily for Xaldin there were no fingerprints or small children, and there was a suspiciously convenient stack of coins on the ground next to the base. He slipped one into the slot and gazed through the eyepieces at the city below.

The dark tower off in the distance was certainly catching his eye—Xaldin safely bet that the Seme and the Nobody they were looking for were somewhere within that tower. He glanced down at the streets, where the spindly, effeminate-looking residents of the city trudged around with blank looks on their faces, fondling their scads of beautifully conditioned and styled hair and muttering things to themselves.

"Gutless," Xaldin mumbled under his breath. Lexaeus had the guidebook... once they regrouped they could point the guidebook's computer down into the valley and hopefully pull up some information on this world's residents.

He'd only had a little bit of experience in the sorts of things that Gutless invariably ended up being based on, so Xaldin sat for a moment to try and ponder to himself exactly what "the deal" with this species could be.

"I SEE A KITTYYYYYY" somebody shrieked from down below. But not *that* far down below, rather, somewhere right behind where Xaldin was perched on the tower.

And before Xaldin could turn around, somebody—or something, rather—was ramming into the base of the observation tower, knocking out the bottom layer and sending the whole thing crashing to the ground.

Xaldin screamed.

"Mother of ***Darkness!***"

Vexen screamed.

Far across the reaches of gummi space, in The World That Never Was—and more specifically, in the main meeting room, Axel sat at the workstation of the Nobodies' supercomputer, carefully keeping an eye out for signals.

His orders had said as much. That morning there'd been a message left on the Answering Machine of Silence that since Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus were heading into what had to be the final world of Fandom Hearts, either Axel or Larxene HAD to stay at the computer at all times in case of a distress signal. If, by some miracle, the Gutless forces suddenly became a thousand times more intimidating and if they managed to overwhelm the trio, it would be up to Axel or Larxene to send in reinforcements.

Only one person was necessary to mind the computer, so the two decided that fairly, the one not watching the computer would be in charge of babysitting the Ukes of the other seven Organization XIII members. This, obviously, made minding the computer look like the most fun job in the world. It came down to a rapid-fire Rock-Paper-Scissors tournament, which Axel had won.

That is not to say that Larxene had been handling the Ukes *all* by herself all day. In fact, her visits to the meeting room were becoming more and more frequent as the hours went on.

"Axel," Larxene had snapped at the first visit, "They're bored. They are **INSISTING** I let them style my hair!"

"So let 'em style your hair?" Axel guessed as though it were that simple.

"I will not have their grimy little hands touching me!" Larxene barked. "Do you know that Zexion's Uke has a real problem with nose picking? I'm running out of ways to keep them busy!"

"Whaddya want me to do, Larxene?" Axel groaned, turning around on the stool to glare at her pointedly. "I can't exactly come help you—I **NEED** to stay at this station. We're under orders, remember? An' I don't know about you, but I don't wanna be at the receiving end of Vexen's temper if we screw this up and he ends up coming back

in one piece, despite said screw up."

"Remember *last* time?" Larxene crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe, shuddering at the memory. "I didn't think it was possible for steel to explode like that."

"So you see what I mean," Axel sighed. "Look, I dunno. Why don't you go put on a movie for 'em in the Theater of Nil?"

That had sounded like a good idea, so Larxene disappeared for ten minutes or so.

"Axel!" she complained when she teleported into the doorframe again for her second visit.

"Whaaat?" Axel sighed. "I'm still watching the computer."

"They can't decide on a movie!" Larxene groaned. "It's seven-to-one, Moulin Rouge against Evil Dead 2."

"Then what's the problem? Sounds like a majority rule to me."

"***I'm*** the one," Larxene snapped. "And I am NOT watching Moulin Rouge. Evil Dead 2 is my favorite movie!"

"If you show them that movie, they'll be up all night and coming into your bedroom asking to sleep in your bed with you," Axel informed her.

"What makes you so sure?"

"I let them watch *The Little Mermaid* yesterday," Axel rolled his eyes.

"... *The Little Mermaid*?"

"Ursula frightened them."

"Oh, for the love of—FINE!"

Larxene vanished again.

The third time, Larxene did not actually come to visit. Instead, Axel was drawn away from his workstation by a cacophonous screeching sound, almost like something being brutally tortured within an inch of its life.

Fearing the worst (Larxene really, really hating the movie and taking it out on one of the hapless Ukes), Axel had rushed upstairs to the Theater of Nil to check on things—

--and found the Ukes absolutely **enraptured** with Ewan McGregor's singing voice.

"The hiiiiiiiiiiiills are aliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiive!" the Ukes sang in an obnoxious unison, "WITH THE SOUND OF MUUUUUUUUUUUUSIC!"

"With soooongs they have suuuuuuuuuung..." Luxord took a solo, rising from his seat and really belting it out.

"For a thousand YEAAAAAAAAAAAAARS!" Xemnas and Xigbar shrieked.

Larxene sat in the front row and looked ten seconds from ending her unlife with a quick electrical shock to the brain.

"What in the hell is going on up here?" Axel sounded exceptionally put off, and was suddenly very paranoid that something might be happening at the computer now that he had left. "Stop that noise!"

"They won't watch the movie," Larxene muttered furiously, a twitch developing in her left eye. "Unless they are allowed to sing."

"NO YOU CAN'T FOOL THE CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUUUUUTION"

"Well, keep it down!" Axel groaned. "I'm trying to stay on guard down there and you guys made me think somebody was being murdered up here!"

He returned to his guard station, grudgingly.

There was about half an hour of perfect silence after that. Axel worked on a game of Solitaire on the computer, still glancing at the radar and turning up the radio to top volume every few minutes to make sure nothing was out of the ordinary.

Then the silence was murdered brutally in the night by another explosion of noise from the direction of the Theater of Nil. Five minutes of waiting brought no end to the sort of screaming, laughing, singing and the foot stomping noises that could only come from choreographed dance moves.

Axel appeared in the doorway of the theater again, infuriated and yelling over the soundtrack. "WHAT is going on up here? I thought I told you to—"

"AXEL, KEEP IT DOWN!" Larxene screamed viciously. "I CAN'T HEAR!"

Tears were flowing freely down the Uke's cheeks, and careful examination could spot a moist line down Larxene's face as well. They were all leaning forward in their seats, exceptionally concerned about whether or not Christian could convince Satine to fall in love with him through a medley of epic proportions.

Axel's jaw dropped. "What the *hell*...?"

"Oh, he sang 'Your Song' to her and he has the voice of an angel!" Larxene gushed, clasping her hands together and giddily stomping her feet on the floor. "She HAS to fall in love with him, she just HAS to!"

"Oh, oh, I've seen this a thousand times!" Saïx sighed longingly, leaning back in his chair and more or less swooning. "And it NEVER gets old!"

"Larxene," Axel tapped her on the shoulder. "What are you doing? *Why* are you crying over a stupid movie?"

"It is *not* stupid!" Larxene said vehemently, clenching her teeth in fury at him. "It is a magnificent embodiment of freedom, beauty, truth and love!"

"I'm mostly getting at the fact that we're *Nobodies*," Axel reminded her sharply. "It's not *possible* for us to get emotional."

"Oh no," Larxene retorted, "It's impossible to watch Moulin Rouge and feel no emotion, don't you know that? Heart or no!"

"Hell on skates!" Axel threw his hands up in the air in frustration, spinning on his heels. "You know what, as long as you're keeping them out of trouble, it doesn't matter anyway! I'm going back to the computer—you just *keep it the hell down*."

"Get out!" Larxene shrilled, gesturing for him to leave. "They're about to kiss!"

Axel stomped off down the hall with a mighty eye roll, just as jubilant screams sounded from the theater.

"HOW WONDERFUL LIFE IS... NOW YOU'RE IN THE WOOOOORLD"

Lexaeus had been through a lot in the however many years he'd been a Nobody.

He was fairly sure this had never, ever happened to him before, though.

He was currently tied up against the rickety wall of the tourist center, bound by yards and yards of luxurious blond hair as a spindly, scrawny Gutless monster clung to him, moaned, licked his earlobes and continuously... "gyrated" against his leg, for lack of a better word. Try as he might, he could not escape from the ridiculously sturdy grip of six feet of nourished and well-conditioned hair.

He had not bothered screaming for help, not because the first few tries had yielded no results, but because he thought on it and decided if Xaldin or Vexen saw him in this position, he would have no other honorable choice but to find a speeding train and go stand in front of it.

"Shnookypants, whyyyy won't you LOVE ME!" the Gutless hissed in his ear, eyes glazed-over and swirling with some kind of sick madness.

"If I say it's because I'm immune to your parasite, will you get off me?" Lexaeus figured it wouldn't hurt to ask.

"Immuuuuuuune?" the Gutless slithered, sticking his lips out in a sexy pout. "Oh, nonsense! No one is immune to our beautiful parasite! Lord Mansex has seen to that!"

"Lord Mansex...?" Lexaeus repeated, then did a quick anagram in his head. Nobodies were quite good at anagrams, after all.

It hit him.

"Oh *hell*," he groaned. "Then it's Xemnas' Seme."

"Mmmm, he really prefers it if you call him by a pet-name, Shnookypants," the Gutless giggled and finally released Lexaeus, taking a few steps back and preparing to lift the gargantuan Nobody with his hair. "If you're so immuuuuune, I'll just take you to see him!"

A few steps back was exactly what Lexaeus needed in order to teleport—he'd feared taking the Gutless with him before, which would have gotten him nowhere except between dimensions with an extremely friendly monster making sweet love to his right leg. Once the creature had backed off slightly, he was able to slip away in between and reappear a short distance away. Before the Gutless knew what was happening, Lexaeus pulled his tomahawk in a mortal draw, smashing its feeble body into the floor like dropping a physics textbook on a popsicle stick model. The Gutless

let out a high-pitched scream of agony, then promptly died in an explosion of pink sparkles.

Lexaeus breathed heavily for a moment, gathering his wits and watching the sparkles settling down into a fine glitter on the floor.

Then he promptly removed his coat, wadded it up into a ball, and flung it into the fireplace with a distasteful mutter of "Ew ... oh hell, ew... I am unclean..."

Once the tainted coat had burned away and Lexaeus had summoned himself a new one (still shuddering slightly), he kneeled down with the guidebook to examine the pink dust left behind by the Gutless.

The book's sensor beeped a few times and brought up a page of information.

"Bishonen Gutless," Lexaeus read off the monitor. "Extremely violent and vicious... scrawny, spindly, wispy, effeminate, strangle victims in long hair... extremely horny... Oh, UNCLEAN!"

He shuddered again and pressed a button to turn the page.

"High-ranking Gutless, come just below Ukes on the hierarchy... Seek mates with which to spread their parasite... Soiled... soiled, blech!"

With one last shudder, Lexaeus turned to the third and final page.

"Though very powerful, also extremely rare... only to be found in Fandom Hearts, namely in the world called..."

Lexaeus drifted off.

His jaw dropped. Then he slammed the guidebook shut, threw it back into the interdimensional pocket, hefted his tomahawk over his shoulder and raced outside.

Lexaeus arrived back in the city outskirts just in time to find Xaldin, to his relief, unharmed.

Unfortunately, he was also clinging desperately to the ruins of the observation tower, now leaning up against tall neon spire as a veritable sea of Bishonen Gutless surrounded him, clawing and moaning at the tower's ruins to pull it down so they

could get their hands on him.

"Lexaeus!" Xaldin yelled, voice becoming just a little bit desperate. "I wonder if you wouldn't mind GETTING ME OUT OF HERE!"

"Teleport down!" Lexaeus shouted back. "We can take them together!"

"You don't think I've already tried that?" Xaldin snapped, struggling as far up the tower ruins as he could as they collapsed further down and there were suddenly scrawny hands grabbing at him. "The second I step out of the portal they jump all over me! There's too many of them! And they're smarter than regular Gutless!"

"Smarter...?" Lexaeus echoed back.

"Yes! They move faster! They spread out and try to surround you!" Xaldin replied frantically. "They even *duck when you attack them*."

"It's just wrong to have a Fandom Hearts world with that kind of Gutless," Lexaeus said, mostly to himself.

"Actually, it makes things harder and much more action-packed," Xaldin added. "Not *necessarily* a good thing at the moment."

Lexaeus was inclined to agree. "How are we supposed to deal with them, then?"

"Over the shoulder!"

"What?"

"OVER YOUR SHOULDER!"

Lexaeus spun around just in time to deal the death blow to a whole mess of Gutless who'd come up behind him while he and Xaldin were busy making subtle gaming jokes that maybe two people would understand. Then wasting no further time, he raced in and began to lay the smackdown on the gang surrounding Xaldin and the tower's ruins.

"COMING UP THE HELL RIGHT NOW!" Xaldin shouted to warn him, quite relieved he was up here and not down there all of a sudden. "SHOOT 'EM IN THE HEAD!"

Once Lexaeus had cleared something of a hole, Xaldin teleported down and

whipped out all six of his lances, wasting no time in going to town on the horde. Back to back, the two of them laid out the Gutless army in a crushed heap, giving the serene and formerly silent city a charming layer of sparkling pink glitter all over the ground and neon buildings.

Once things were quiet, Xaldin exhaled sharply and put away all but one of his lances. "What were those? And where in the hell are we?"

"Those were Bishonen Gutless," Lexaeus said. "And we're..." he paused. "Wait—where's Vexen?"

"We sent him to that shed," Xaldin's face lit up in furious alarm. "They'll have knocked that death-trap down around him!"

"Death-trap...?" Lexaeus repeated suspiciously.

"Never mind! Hurry! Before we have another cake incident on our hands!" Xaldin barked, and the two of them raced off to the alleyway shed where poor Vexen had been sent.

Shockingly, Vexen was not in mortal peril when his two comrades finally managed to reach him. As a matter of fact, it seemed he was quite comfortable.

The ancient and decrepit shed that Xaldin had ordered him to, while ancient and decrepit and death-trappy on the outside, was quite a different story inside. It was actually a well-equipped rumpus room that had just undergone a remodeling job on its interior and was waiting for the permits to clear before the contractors went on to fix the outside.

When Xaldin and Lexaeus found him, Vexen was quite literally lounging in a cushy, high-backed leather chair with his feet up, a newspaper in his hands, a piping cup of Earl Grey tea on the end table, and the radio turned to the classical music station.

"Hello, gentlemen," Vexen said cheerily, having a long sip of delicious tea and right in the middle of the crossword puzzle. "Can you think of a seven-letter word for 'reaction to meeting an old friend'?"

"*Furious*?" Xaldin guessed.

"No, no, it starts with an 'S'," Vexen informed him and glanced up at his comrades. Lexaeus looked harried, and Xaldin was obviously ten seconds from hitting the roof. "Something wrong?"

"The two of us are out there, fighting off bloodthirsty hordes of powerful Gutless and nearly getting ourselves killed—and you're in here doing the puzzle page and listening to Bach."

"It's *Tchaikovsky*, Xaldin. For shame," Vexen scolded him. "And you're the one who told me to check this place out, were you not?"

Xaldin glared furiously up at the sky, as though directing his fury at some kind of puppet master who might or might not even exist out there beyond the fourth wall.

"In any case," Lexaeus stepped in before the impending argument could even get started. "Don't you think we both have more important things to do besides sitting around drinking tea and arguing? This world is far more dangerous than we could have ever expected!"

"No kidding," Xaldin groaned, brushing his braids out of his face. "Have you seen the Gutless from this world?"

Lexaeus handed the guidebook over to Vexen, whose expression immediately became very concerned. "Bishonen? For the love of nothing... I was afraid of this."

"You know about these?" Lexaeus asked.

"Not precisely," Vexen scratched behind his ear with a sigh. "But my research pointed to evidence of such a powerful variety. You see, whereas most Gutless are created from the stolen you knows of their victims, Bishonen Gutless are unique in that they do not *have* you knows. This makes them more similar to the Ukes than the Semes or any of the other types of Gutless we have seen."

"You mean..." Xaldin said quietly.

"Yes," Vexen set his jaw unpleasantly. "It seems that these things are the next-level evolution of the Ukes. So if we don't return our comrades' you-knows back to them soon..."

The dire situation was easily understood in the silence that choked the room.

"I managed to gather some information," Lexaeus said after a moment. "The Seme

signal we picked up before belongs to Xemnas."

"Oh dear," Xaldin sighed. "Then the other Nobody must be Roxas."

"But he's unharmed!" Vexen pounded a fist into his palm. "... So far!"

"We haven't any time to lose," Xaldin turned back towards the door to the little shed, outside of which he was sure lay acres upon acres of Bishonen Gutless, moaning and orgasming and grasping out in search of victims, even now probably heading straight for them. "We must get to the bottom of this world and get out before it's too late."

"I managed to gather some information on the world, too, if anyone's interested," Lexaeus said calmly. "The name is quite upsetting."

"Oh really?" Vexen, who had not been privy to the behaviors of the Gutless outside, sounded skeptical. "What's it called?"

"It's terrible," Lexaeus muttered. "Utterly terrible. You're not going to like it."

"What is it?" Xaldin urged.

"Well, the world is all based around this city," Lexaeus said. "And this city is called..."

LOS MACHOSEXOS

There was a long silence.

"You're right. I don't like that one bit," Vexen sighed.

And so it began, our three heroes' madcap race through the streets of the city of Los Machosexos, ducking behind buildings and dodging swarms of Gutless hunting them down like wounded yaks in every alley, around every corner.

It was not as though the mission had gotten any more urgent—no, really, it was more a sudden surge of urgency spurred on by the realization that this world was a perfect example of just what happened to places that fell to the power of the Gutless.

Upon closer inspection, Los Machosexos appeared to be a resting place for ruined potential, a symbol of things that had been and the end of those things and how those things had been destroyed. The now destroyed and decrepit buildings and businesses looked like they had certainly been prosperous at one time or another—from the looks of it, a time very long ago.

Even many of the people they ran into looked as though they hadn't been Gutless for very long. Some seemed to have faded into these flimsy shells in the very primes of their lives, carrying the extra skin that came from the forcible destruction of muscles and masculinity via you-know removal and Ukefication. It was a frightening thought indeed to imagine their fellow Organization members—much less themselves—in this situation, with the sunken skin and the sparkling eyes and the spindly fingers...

"Sure enough, the signals are coming from that ridiculously dark tower," Lexaeus said, glancing at the guidebook for a quick second as the three of them rounded into some kind of city square, ducking off into an alley to hide and catch their breaths.

"Not just a tower," Xaldin corrected, pointing to the vast clump of abandoned steel buildings curled up in the shadow of the tower. "It looks like an entire industrial complex... a *factory* of some kind!"

"Do you think that's some sort of Gutless factory?" Vexen asked, mostly to himself.

"That'd be my guess," Lexaeus replied. "And they seem to have kicked production into overdrive."

The three Nobodies glanced up in time to see a veritable army of Bishonen marching toward them with glazed-over looks in their eyes and big, stupid smiles on their zombified faces.

"SHNOOKYPAAAAAANTS!" they moaned. "KITTYYYYYY!"

Lexaeus and Xaldin looked disgusted at the pet names. Vexen looked intrigued. "Do they, ah, know you two from somewhere?" he asked with a slightly savage grin.

"Oh shut up!" Xaldin groaned.

"Once again, I hate to interrupt the argument," Lexaeus insisted in a hurried tone, "But there is a gigantic army of Gutless marching towards us, we're all three exhausted from fighting all this way, and if we don't get into that tower and find a way to block them from following us, we're going to be gyrated to death!"

"We're going to be what now?" Vexen blinked.

Lexaeus turned perfectly red. "Er, i-it's not—"

"Call for backup!" Xaldin insisted. "Once they're held off we can teleport towards the tower!"

The three Organization members backed down the alley as far as they could go, further and further away from the slowly approaching mob. Xaldin and Vexen began kicking over trash cans and boxes to create something of a temporary barrier, holding off the leading Gutless with swings of their weapons.

Lexaeus quickly hit the signal button in the back of the guidebook to send a distress signal off to The World That Never Was. "Number Eight! Number Eight! Do you read me?" he screamed into the radio. "Number Eight, this is Number Five! We are in need of reinforcements. Do you read me? Send reinforcements! Axel?"

There was no answer.

"Hurry up, Lexaeus!" Vexen snarled, bashing away a group of their attackers with his shield.

"Axel...?"

More silence.

"I can't hold them off anymore!" Xaldin shouted. "We've got to get out of here—"

"If we open a portal here they'll come right through it after us!" Vexen yelled.

"AXEL!"

"ONE DAY I'LL FLYYYYY AWAAAAAY-"

"MY GIIIIIIIIIIIIIFT IS MY SOOOONG!"

"YOU WON'T FOOL THE CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION! NO, NO-"

It was the climax. The Ukes were stacked in a sobbing pile in the middle of the theater aisle, clinging to each other and crying for all they were worth.

"Yes, YES!" Larxene wailed, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of Saix's coat. "OH, THE DUKE WILL NEVER STOP THEM NOW!"

"OH MY GOD!" Axel sobbed wildly into his hand, reaching with his other one for one of the thousand tissue boxes one of the Ukes had thoughtfully brought in from the supply closet. "OH, HE FORGAVE HER!"

"THE GREATEST THING YOU'LL EVER LEARN IS JUST TO LOOO-HO-HO-HOOOOVE..." Larxene cried.

"And be loved... in... RETURN!" Axel broke down, clutching onto Larxene as the two of them sobbed into each others' arms.

In the computer room, sirens were going off.

They ran. They ran until they couldn't run anymore, they ran until sweat poured down their faces and their lungs ached with each breath.

Or rather, since Nobodies do not have hearts, it is probably safe to assume they don't have lungs, either. Continuing along that tangent, you can probably conclude that Nobodies do not have stomachs, lower digestive tracts, reproductive or endocrine systems. This makes over 90 percent of the Organization XIII-centered fanfiction in the world completely impossible and probably sent a few disillusioned fans off to take cold, sobbing showers.

But, uh, anyway, they ran.

They ran blocks and blocks through the crowded streets of Los Machosexos, dodging wave after wave of mindless Bishonen Gutless zombies and making their way towards the dark tower which oddly enough had the grand doors wide open, beckoning entrance into its dark and hallowed halls.

The trio reached the ironic sanctuary a good hundred yards or so ahead of their pursuers. The entryway was dark and looked just as run-down as the rest of the city, shadows obscuring great fallen steel beams and the remains of vases and furniture and what looked like a reception desk.

"They're *still* coming," Vexen gestured out the open doors at the legions of Gutless wandering up the street towards them.

"Hell. They're more persistent than the Tycoon game designers," Xaldin said between gritted teeth.

"Quickly—let's barricade ourselves in here so they won't interfere!" Lexaeus suggested, and the three of them got to work.

Xaldin hefted the great metal doors with hurricane gusts of wind, pushing them closed—Vexen and Lexaeus then sealed them with thick layers of ice and stone, taking care to block all the windows and security grates and brick and steel fortress walls and filing cabinets and industrial ovens and anything else zombies seem terribly good at breaking into and popping out from.

When they were through, the entryway of the darkest tower appeared very much like some kind of ice cave dungeon, the obligatory sort to be found in every RPG ever made, ever.

"That ought to hold them off..." Lexaeus sighed, wiping the sweat from his brow, despite the fact we had just figured out they didn't have any sweat glands and... okay, okay, never mind.

"At least long enough for us to track down those signals and get the hell out of here," Xaldin sighed, brushing his braids out of his face and shaking his head. "The end of this mission cannot come soon enough."

"Oh, I'm afraid *not*."

All three of our heroes whipped their heads up at the sound of a deep and unmistakably evil voice, a voice that had in another life belonged to the man they and the rest of the Organization looked up to as their Superior. They turned around just in time to see Xemnas' Seme, sprawled out luxuriously on the shadowy barrel of what appeared to be a tremendous ray gun of some sort—a ray gun that was pointed right at them.

Mansex was by all accounts an extremely attractive man—he was chiseled yet soft and effeminate yet manly, clad in a feather boa and a long and ravishing bright pink coat that vaguely resembled the coat he wore in his other life as the head of Organization XIII. He held up a hand and examined perfectly manicured blood-red fingernails, stretching out one of his feet and showing off his hundred dollar apple green Gucci stilettos. Blush and eyeshadow enhanced his flawless features, and he lovingly puffed up a handful of lusciously soft hair the color of silver.

"Welcome to my humble abode! Mmph, I just LOVE what you've done with the

lobby!" the Seme giggled and kicked his feet excitedly. "It's nice to finally meet the three jerks responsible for the near-upset of the Orgy's wonderful plan!"

"You!" Vexen snarled. "You're the Seme we've been looking for!"

"That I am, sugar," giggled the Seme, striking a supermodel pose. "The name's Maaaaanssssex! And I am the head of the Semes and Orgy IX!"

There was a long moment of silence.

"Mansex," Xaldin repeated.

"Yeeeeeeess," Mansex nodded, tittering to himself.

"Sounds like steam escaping," Vexen whispered to his comrades.

"Wow. I still can't believe it. 'Mansex'," Lexaeus rolled his eyes. "That only stopped being funny ten minutes after the game came out."

"Nobody asked you, hot stuff!" Mansex huffed and crossed his arms, shifting to put a leg on either side of the ray gun. "My name is of little consequence in any case... I regret to inform you three hunks that you've come all this way for—okay, you know what, I am over here trying to exposit some plotline and you're all being exceptionally rude."

"Please change positions," Vexen hissed between gritted teeth, turned away from Mansex and covering his eyes like even a glimpse could be fatal. Xaldin and Lexaeus were also shielding their views, and Xaldin looked about to retch.

"Change p..." Mansex murmured, then glanced down at the caliber of the barrel he was straddling. "Oh!" Giggling, he turned sidesaddle. "Sssssorry!"

"Thank you," Lexaeus sighed.

Not to be fazed, Mansex continued his veritable slew of sinister dialogue and vague exposition. "I've been waiting *ages* for the three of you to finally get here! You've done quite well to make it this far! It's just too bad you had to dispose of all my charming minions along the way. The staff meetings will be ever so boring now!"

"So you must be the mastermind behind this idiotic plot," Xaldin sneered, reaching behind him instinctually to call down a lance or two.

"Wrong wrong, I'm afraid," the Seme giggled and shook his finger at them. "I can only take credit for the hostile takeover of Fandom Hearts and the beautiful attack on your world. I am but a humble Gutless in the service of our wonderful leader, the Grand Master Fangirl!"

"The Grand Master Fangirl?" Lexaeus muttered, arming himself with his tomahawk. "Who in the worlds..."

"Ah, alas, but I've said too much!" Mansex moaned and threw his arm over his eyes melodramatically, then pulled a thick and well thumbed-through volume out of the pocket of his coat. "My **Toadying For the Final Boss for Fun and Profit** book says I'm not supposed to reveal our entire plan until AFTER I'm sure you're all going to be destroyed in seconds... but I'm not supposed to destroy you, see."

"Oh, aren't you?" Vexen shot back, shield in hand. "Are we to become victims of your half-baked Gutless takeover, then?"

"Oh, you'll convert and join our side all right," Mansex brushed hair from his eyes seductively. "Whether you agree to it or not!"

"Unfortunately, you'll find your beloved parasite doesn't affect the three of us," Xaldin said coolly, a sneer on his face.

"I didn't say anything about the *Gutless* turning the three of you, did I?" Mansex giggled and leaned forward on the ray gun's barrel. "Direct your attention between my legs!"

There was a pause.

"For heavens' sake," Mansex rolled his eyes. "I mean the ray gun!"

"Ah, yes. That," Lexaeus shook off a terrible mental image.

"This is the project that the Grand Master Fangirl and I have been working ever so hard on for MONTHS!" Mansex cackled, laying on his stomach and stroking the shiny metal of the barrel. "This is my beloved Yaoi Cannon! You will find its effect somewhat similar to the Gutless parasite... it targets and eliminates the you-know-whats of **anybody** it's pointed at!"

"Anybody?" Xaldin asked, eyes narrowing.

"Anybody!" Mansex retorted. "Well, any *male* body. It doesn't matter if you're

immune to the Gutless parasite or herpes or the Ubange jungle rot! One shot from this little darling and you'll be more swishy than a cheerleading pom! More sexually charged than a bull elephant in musth! And more beautiful and womanly than Gackt!"

A united gasp sounded from the trio.

"Not... GACKT," Lexaeus gaped.

"You MONSTERS!" Xaldin roared.

"How could you ever get the power to build something like that?" Vexen snarled, motioning for the three Nobodies to spread out and prepare for what would be an extremely dangerous battle. "It makes absolutely no scientific sense! It's impossible!"

"We'll just see how impossible it is!" Mansex howled with villainous laughter and drew a remote control from his coat pocket, starting up the Yaoi Cannon with a loud whirring noise.

"Whatever happens," Lexaeus yelled to his comrades. "Do NOT get hit with that cannon!"

But Lexaeus's sage warning was unfortunately seconds too late. Mansex had neglected to mention just how fast the Yaoi Cannon was, and Xaldin had not thought to consider its aiming speed until the precarious few seconds when time seemed to stop—seconds that occurred precisely after the cannon took aim at him and a colorful light filled the barrel.

"Oh son of a BITCH!" Xaldin yelled.

"XALDIN!" Lexaeus and Vexen screamed.

But Xaldin could only watch as light poured from the end of the barrel in a straight, speedy beam heading directly for him.

There was really only one thing to say at a time like this.

"Oh sh-"

CLIFFHANGER!

Or is it? Do you people know what to expect from me by now? Or am I far too serious about this terrible, grave matter to give it a crappy, hilariously anti-climactic solution that takes a sentence or less?

Well, I guess we'll just have to see!

Sorry this chapter took so long, by the way. I spent the last month embroiled in finals, in horrible trauma, and on a trauma-related note, in my family's annual celebration of Festivus. I really almost had my father pinned this year. And oh, the grievances we aired.

Happy New Year, everyone!

Hunka Hunka Burnin' Love

Chapter Eleven: Hunka Hunka Burnin' Love

There have been several physical happenings in the history of humankind that have endured far longer than the event itself. These are the happenings that boggle the minds of mathematicians and physicists and high school pre-calculus students for centuries thereafter. Who could forget Albert Einstein and the splitting of the atom? Sir Isaac Newton and his famous apple? Archimedes and his bathtub of physical ponderings?

In the few seconds immediately following the very first discharge of the Yaoi Cannon, another such event occurred. It was an event so epic, so shocking, and so physically improbable it would have physicists the world over arguing and writing dissertations about it for a thousand years to come. Or rather, since the event took place in a fan fiction about a video game, it *would have* had physicists the world over arguing and writing dissertations, but only the extremely nerdy ones suffering from stress-related hallucinations and an overabundance of free time.

Let us break it down in Overly Detailed Purple Description Mode™.

The beam from the Yaoi Cannon was aimed directly at Xaldin when it fired. The resulting laser was far too fast even for everyone's favorite Whirlwind Lancer to dodge and he knew it, explaining his cliffhanging exclamation of "Oh shi-"

But before Xaldin could pronounce the "t", before Mansex could finish the final syllable of his maniacal peal of laughter, before Vexen and Lexaeus could even blink, and most importantly *before the beam hit*—Xaldin's body was thrown backwards as though an invisible linebacker the size of an SUV had rammed into him.

Xaldin twisted to the side in midair and landed hard on the ground a few yards back, skidding a few feet before coming to a stop, face-down and seemingly unconscious. The Yaoi Cannon's laser struck the frozen linoleum harmlessly off to the side.

"XALDIN!" Vexen and Lexaeus yelled.

"Oh pooppy, I missed!" Mansex snapped his fingers in frustration and with a swivel of his hips, pointed the barrel of the Yaoi Cannon at the two standing Nobodies. "But

I won't this time!"

Vexen and Lexaeus immediately separated, spreading out across the room and glancing back and forth from Xaldin's unconscious (No)body to the sinister Seme. The Yaoi Cannon fired a second time, completely missing somewhere in between its two new targets.

"I will have the three of you, one way or another!" Mansex cackled, rubbing his hands together evilly. "Resistance is futile! You will join our Seme brotherhood!"

"*Brotherhood?*" Vexen sneered scornfully, "Your membership's a little low for that, isn't it?"

"Not low at all, Angelcakes," Mansex struck what he must have thought was a seductive pose. "My dear baby brother Roxas is almost through with his special treatment!"

"Roxas!" Lexaeus growled, "What are you doing to him?"

"Nothing for you to be concerned about, Puffikins," Mansex cackled. "And besides, it won't be too long until our beautiful Seme army is back to what it used to be."

"Your Semes are no more," Vexen snapped. "Or did you miss the memo? We've got nearly all the... you knows of our comrades locked safely away in a Tupperware!"

"Oh doooooooooooooooooo yooooooooooooou?" Mansex said through a sharp intake of breath, creating the effect of some kind foghorn going off.

"I don't like the ominous way you said that," Vexen said suddenly, glancing over at Lexaeus. "Where's the Tupperware?"

"It's—" Lexaeus began, and reached back behind him into the interdimensional backpack where he also kept the world guidebook and his tomahawk when they weren't crucial to the plot. "—right here in the..." he drifted off.

"I don't like the ominous way you drifted off," Vexen said, his voice pitching a bit towards panic. "The Tupperware... *is* there, right?"

Horror dawned on Lexaeus's face. "Oh **hell**."

"BWAAHAHAHAHA!" Mansex broke out into hysterical giggles, pulling the missing Tupperware container out from the satiny pink folds of his fabulous coat.

"LOOKING FOR *THIS*?"

"You son of a bitch!" Vexen screamed in fury, pointing accusatorily at the cackling Seme. "*How in the hell* did you get that?"

"I had it for almost all of the last chapter, you sillypants," Mansex rolled his eyes as though it was obvious. "I can't believe you took this long to figure it out!"

"That Gutless," Lexaeus muttered gruffly, clenching his fist in anger. "When it had me against the wall, it must've..."

"The what had you *where* now?" Vexen asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nothing," Lexaeus said quickly. "Nothing at—" Then he paused, thought for a moment, and glared up at Mansex. "Wait a minute! That's not possible! I killed that Gutless! I watched it die in a cloud of dust! Even if it *did* steal the Tupperware from me, it never made it back here to give it to you!"

"That's... uh, that's right!" Vexen was still not exactly sure what Lexaeus was talking about, but agreed vigorously nonetheless.

Mansex huffed and crossed his arms. "If your cute Rastafarian friend over there is allowed to violate the laws of physics and logic, so am I!"

"But you—but he—" Vexen sputtered furiously. "You BASTARD!"

"I thank you kindly for reuniting the rest of my Seme brothers and bringing them back home," Mansex purred, luxuriously stretching out prone on the barrel of the Yaoi Cannon. He fondled the Tupperware lovingly. "Once I finish the three of you off, I'll present these to the Grand Master Fangirl and she'll restore them back to their beautiful selves... Then, of course, we'll have your Semes too, and whatever dear little Roxas is to become. Then we'll retrieve our fallen brother Aku-chan and our Organization will finally be ready to march upon the rest of the universe!"

"Never!" Lexaeus snarled. "We'll DIE before letting that happen!"

"That's sort of the idea!" Mansex smiled, and the Yaoi Cannon locked into aiming position again, charging up for what would be the final blast...

Or it would have been, that is, if Vexen hadn't quickly thrown out his hand. An arctic blast struck the Yaoi Cannon and the barrel was plugged with a mass of ice—unfortunately, too fast for Mansex to cancel the discharge.

There was a magnificent CRUNCH from deep within the bowels of the Yaoi Cannon, an electrical fizzle, a plume of smoke—Mansex clutched the outside as it suddenly lurched backwards with the force of the blast. "Oh shi-

And before he could pronounce the "t", before he could move, before he could blink—the Yaoi Cannon exploded in a great burst of light and shrapnel and bits and pieces of Mansex's fabulous pink coat and feather boa.

When the dust had settled and the weird blinky eye floaters had faded from their visions, Mansex was nowhere to be seen.

"Did he explode into little Seme pieces?" Vexen asked hopefully, as Lexaeus volunteered to teleport up and check.

"I don't think so," Lexaeus concluded, poking around in the rubble atop the platform. "The Tupperware's gone too. I think he got away. More than likely through this Mansex-shaped hole in the reinforced steel doors that lead to the hallway beyond."

"Ah. Yes. More than likely," Vexen agreed, hurrying over to the fallen mass of black that was Xaldin and kneeling. "Xaldin. Xaldin! Are you all right?"

"Vexen," Lexaeus warned him as he reappeared down on the first floor. "... Be careful. He may be—"

"The beam missed him," Vexen insisted quickly. "He most certainly is not. Xaldin! Wake up!"

For a moment, the two Nobodies stood in anxious silence and waited for their comrade to stir. After a bit, Lexaeus reached over and nudged him with his foot.

Xaldin groaned suddenly.

"Oh good," Lexaeus sighed with relief. "Xaldin, are you all right?"

"All right?" Xaldin mumbled, slowly pushing himself up onto his knees and putting a hand to his forehead. "I... I think so. I look all right, yes?"

"You don't appear to have developed any more beautiful hair than what you already had," Vexen replied. "Do you feel all right?"

He paused for a moment to consider this, hand still raised to his face to rub his

eyes. "Mm... yes," he said. "Suffered something of a bad knock, but it's to be expected from a dodge like that."

"That was an amazing dodge, if I may say," Lexaeus commented, reaching down good-naturedly to help his comrade up off the ground. "It didn't even look physically possible."

"Yes, I would certainly like to know how you did that," Vexen sighed, crossing his arms. "It certainly didn't match any- **HOLY MOTHER OF DARKNESS.**"

"What!" Lexaeus jumped nearly a foot in the air, scanning around the room for an enemy. "Vexen, don't scream like that! You made me think-" He froze. **"HELL ON TOAST! XALDIN!"**

"*What?*" Xaldin grumbled in annoyance, rubbing his head. "Not so loud, I've got a headache."

"Xaldin!" Vexen gaped, eyes so wide it looked like they might bug out. "Y-your face!"

"What? My *face*?" Xaldin paused, reaching up and putting a hand to his face in alarm. "What do you mean, my face? There's nothing wrong with it!"

"Your..." Lexaeus stammered, unable to tear his eyes away. "Good God! It's..."

"Could one of you please do me a favor and speak in a complete sentence?" Xaldin snapped. "What are you going on about?"

Vexen clutched at his shield with trembling fingers, holding it up for Xaldin to use as a mirror. "I think you better see for yourself."

Xaldin glared at the both of them and stared at his reflection furiously. "What in the hell are you two—AUUGH!"

There was a moment of awkward silence as Xaldin sputtered in disbelief, turning his face this way and that to see if it was just a trick of the lighting, just some horrible optical illusion. "Oh my GOD! NO!" he finally yelled. "My sideburn... mother of darkness, my **sideburn!**"

Indeed, what had once been the left of Xaldin's pair of buff, manly, thick and luxurious sideburns had warped and mutated into a thin, wispy curlicue that kinked off the side of his face like he'd rubbed it down with expensive French salon hair gel.

It gleamed and sparkled with what appeared to be a layer of glittery conditioner, and it seemed to be growing rapidly, twisting and curling across his face.

"What in the hell *happened*?" Vexen gaped, leaning to try and get a good look at the mutated muttonchop.

"That accursed beam must have grazed my face!" Xaldin sounded extremely upset, pinching and pawing at his unfortunate facial hair. "Son of a BITCH!"

"It could have been much worse, Xaldin," Lexaeus told him. "Calm down. At least you didn't get hit."

This did not seem to comfort Xaldin, who snatched Vexen's shield and propped it up against a nearby desk, kneeling to concentrate on fixing his poor sideburn. "That's not possible—it missed! No... oh, for the love of nothing, they threw me out of the way and the left must have taken the edge off the blast... aagh! This can't be happening!"

"'They'?" Vexen repeated.

"This cannot be happening!" Xaldin repeated miserably, clutching his forehead in his hand and feeling a migraine coming on.

Lexaeus appeared over Xaldin's shoulder to offer some encouragement, but Vexen stayed back and seemed to be very carefully considering something.

"Slow down. Xaldin," he said suddenly. "'They' threw you out of the way?"

"Isn't it *obvious*? A dodge like that's not physically *possible*, Vexen!" Xaldin roared, obviously in no mood to talk.

Lexaeus also looked puzzled all of a sudden. "Wait a minute, Xaldin. Did you just say..."

"It's just temporary," Xaldin kept repeating to himself, like a mantra. "Has to be temporary, this most certainly isn't permanent..."

"Xaldin," Vexen interrupted him sharply. "Did you just imply that your epic dodging maneuver was thanks to... your *sideburns*?"

Xaldin glared at Vexen over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow. "Yes?"

Vexen and Lexaeus looked dumbstruck.

"Your sideburns," Lexaeus cleared his throat after a moment. "Are sentient. And they threw you out of the way of the Yaoi Cannon."

"This is news?" Xaldin snapped irritably.

"Well, yes," Vexen replied, still mulling all this over. "How in the *hell* are your sideburns...?"

"They have been since we lost our hearts," Xaldin replied between gritted teeth. "Where have you been?"

"Firmly grounded in reality with you—or so I thought," Vexen gaped.

"Don't give me that shit!" Xaldin roared, spinning around furiously. "How oblivious *are* you two? You haven't noticed that they emote?"

"I apologize, but I don't spend as much time staring at your face as you might think," Vexen retorted sharply. "I mean—what the hell? Your sideburns... that doesn't even make *sense*!"

"You think I would make this up? Open your eyes, Vexen, my goddamn facial hair has been Ukefied! You think this—"

"Gentlemen," Lexaeus interrupted loudly. "Is this really the time?"

"LOOK AT IT!" Xaldin growled, voice hinging on desperation. "FOR GOD'S SAKES, **LOOK AT IT!**"

"Xaldin, calm down," Lexaeus warned him. "I understand that was a close call and this must be... very, very humiliating, but getting worked up about it will do nothing to help our current situation."

"For the love of— it's trying to grow across my face!" Xaldin groaned, rubbing at his cheek. "It's trying to—oh my GOD, *it's coming on to the right one!*"

"You've got to be kidding me," Vexen said between what could have been snorts of laughter.

Xaldin's eyebrow twitched. "SHUT UP! My sideburn is trying to score with the other side! *This is not in any way funny!*"

He was interrupted by a sudden flash of light and a whooshing sound, no doubt the sound of the short, coarse hair that connected his left sideburn to the rest of his head puffing out in beautiful waves and growing six or seven inches. Xaldin cried out and quickly covered the tuft with his hand.

"Now, see, *that* was funny!" Vexen burst out laughing, clutching his sides with mirth.

"I'LL KILL YOU, VEXEN! LOOK AT IT! IT WON'T STOP!" Xaldin screamed, going berserk. "IT'S SPREADING! I'M TURNING INTO A-"

He stopped suddenly as Lexaeus grabbed him by the coat and slapped him hard across the face. There was a moment of silence. Xaldin exhaled.

"I..." he sounded much calmer. "Thank you, Lexaeus. I needed that."

"Feel better?" Lexaeus asked.

"Slightly," Xaldin took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes... okay. I'm calm."

"Now," Lexaeus said calmly. "Vexen, if you could, please stop laughing and let's figure out some way to put a stop to this before Xaldin turns into an Uke?"

"Yes," Vexen fought back a few extra chuckles, ignoring the murderous glare Xaldin tossed him and pulling out the guidebook. He flipped through the index and pointed the computer's scanner at Xaldin's effeminate sideburn, skimming over the information that popped up. "Let's see. It hasn't got much information on this particular... uh... condition."

"Just *forget* about the sentience thing," Xaldin urged him. "How do I stop this?"

"Well, it's like you said," Vexen hummed to himself, frowning as he read on. "It's been hit by the Yaoi Cannon, so it's been Ukefied... Seeing as your, er, friend there doesn't have its own... you know... does it?"

"No," Xaldin rolled his eyes.

"All right. In that case," Vexen clapped the guidebook closed. "Shave it off."

"What?" Xaldin gaped.

"Shave it off. What's the problem? If we cut off the source of the infection, it shouldn't spread to the rest of you."

"We're not shaving it off," Xaldin assured him.

"Why the hell not?"

"I do not shave my sideburns. That would be like cutting off my arm."

"I think this is something of a dire situation, Xaldin," Lexaeus advised. "They will grow back nearly instantaneously. We're Nobodies."

"You two don't *get it*, do you?" Xaldin groaned, burying his face in his hand.

"All right then," Vexen tossed the guidebook back wherever it went when it wasn't important to the plot and waved his hand to recover his shield. "Then I don't know what to tell you. If you don't want to cut it off, then we'd better get moving."

"This is the Gutless stronghold, after all," Lexaeus tried to be optimistic. "There's bound to be some type of cure or antidote hidden away somewhere here. They seem to be that stupid of antagonists."

Vexen nodded in agreement. "Not to mention Roxas is here, and from what that freak said they seem to be preparing to do something terrible to him."

"Plus, he's stolen the Tupperware," Lexaeus reminded them. "And unless we want to re-fight all of those damned Semes..."

Xaldin sighed and nodded, rubbing his head and feeling around his sideburn with a final resigned look of disgust. "Yes. You're right. We haven't much time."

Weapons in hand and rapidly degenerating sideburn on face, the trio teleported up to the platform where the smoldering remains of the Yaoi Cannon were scattered and slipped through the Mansex-shaped hole in the reinforced steel doors to the chambers beyond.

"Xaldin," Vexen said quietly as they made their way up many flights of stairs. "Now that I'm aware of the state of your, uh... facial hair... You will let me examine them, won't you?"

"Absolutely not," Xaldin retorted. "If you're so desperate to learn about sentient hair, go ask Marluxia."

"Marluxia? What would that mincing, prancing twit know?" Vexen snapped. "When did that vain, idle, hairspray-sniffing—"

Suddenly Vexen stopped running. He stood there quietly for a moment, pondering that.

"And lo," he said in a dead sort of voice. "The mysteries fall away. Life stands before me, explained."

Somewhere across the universe, very far away from Los Machosexos, somewhere clear on the other side of Fandom Hearts—in fact, straight out the giant keyhole and all the way off in a distant corner of the Canon Universe—it was a beautiful day on the Destiny Islands.

The sky was a perfect shade of blue without a trace of clouds, and a cool wind blew the scent of saltwater from the sea across the warm beaches. The palm trees swayed softly in the breeze and the waves lapped at the rocky shore of the island where three teenagers sat, relaxing and watching the water.

"So guys," Sora said cheerily, bouncing slightly on the bent-over tree that served as their favorite hangout spot. "What do you wanna do today?"

"I dunno," Riku sighed, staring up at the sky. "What do you wanna do, Kairi?"

"I dunno," Kairi shrugged, tying knots in a piece of long grass she'd plucked. "But we should definitely do more than we did yesterday."

"Yeah," Sora agreed. "Wait... what was it we did yesterday?"

Riku looked thoughtful. "Remember, we sat here trying to figure out what to do all day?"

"Oh, right," Sora nodded. "Yeah, let's definitely do something."

"So what do you wanna do?" Kairi asked.

"I dunno," Riku shrugged. "Sora, you always come up with good ideas."

"We could, uh..." Sora murmured thoughtfully. "Jeez. I dunno!"

"When did we turn so *boring*?" Kairi sighed.

"I think it comes with being a teenager," Riku shook his head.

"I mean, seriously. Here we are, three kids who live on a couple tropical islands with lots of cool grottos and caves and a waterfall and a zip line and a pirate ship and a tree house that any other kid would give his left leg for, and we've each got our own rowboats and miles and miles of ocean to explore," Sora crossed his arms and frowned. "Not to mention we've all got secret magical powers and we're friends with Disney characters with access to ships that can take us to any world in the whole universe, rife and full with things to explore and all kinds of colorful characters to befriend. You'd think we could think of *something* to do."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"We could beat the everloving crap out of Wakka," Riku suggested.

"We did that on Tuesday," Kairi sighed.

"But would you listen to his voice actor's godawful impersonation?" Riku replied. "Beating him up never gets old!"

Sora slammed his fist into his palm triumphantly. "Oh! I got it! We could build a raft and plan a journey across the ocean!"

Riku and Kairi looked at him uneasily.

"Uh, Sora? That *never* ends well," Riku warned him.

"Oh. Right," Sora frowned.

There was another moment of silence.

"Well, I guess that leaves us with only the usual," Kairi said in a sing-song voice, leaning forward on the tree.

"Sora and me getting in a giant, friendship-ruining fight over your womanly affections while you egg us on bitchily and eventually turn us both down so we realize that it was really each other we loved all along?" Riku guessed.

"Uh... that never happens, Riku," Sora reminded him.

"It was just a guess," Riku shrugged.

"No, guys. Our other usual," Kairi corrected them.

"Which is...?" Sora and Riku asked in unison.

"Race you to the pirate ship!" Kairi suddenly leapt up, giggling and speeding across the bridge.

"You little cheater!" Riku shouted and jumped off the tree, close behind her within a few strides of his long legs.

Sora laughed and was soon after them. "Hey, you're both cheaters! I-"

Suddenly, he cried out in surprise and put a hand to his groin. He winced in pain, tripped and stumbled to his knees. "OW OW OW OW!"

"Sora!" Kairi skidded to a stop just before leaping down off the roof of the hut, putting a hand to her mouth. "Oh, are you okay?"

Sora made a very amusing face as the sensation seemed to pass. "Whoa... uh... I... yeah... I think so."

Riku slung an arm around his and helped him to his feet. "What happened? Did you pull something?"

"No. Well, I dunno," Sora winced again, rubbing his tummy. "It was like I just had this really bad cramp."

"Is it still there?" Kairi asked, running over and performing a quick visual checkup.

"No," Sora shook his head. "But man that was weird. I wonder what it was?"

If only Sora knew what the sudden, striking pain in his gut (the area of his gut, anyway) was... then many of the horrifying events that were to transpire oh, so very shortly might have been avoided. But as is the usual way of the universe he didn't, they weren't, and well, here we are.

The long, dark corridor that lay beyond the barred double doors back in the

Darkest Tower was pitch black and impossible to see in. After what seemed like an eternal stretch of flat, the straight hallway became stairs that went up, then down, then spiraled around and around themselves up six or seven floors, then around in a level circle and up again. There were, total, 3,587 stairs leading up to the next real floor of the building. If the Nobodies *had* hearts, they would have been pounding and halfway to cardiac arrest by the time they reached the end.

Though already accustomed to moving around in shadow, our three heroes were aided in their traversal of the massive corridor thanks to the occasional bright flashes of light that exploded from the side of Xaldin's head. These flashes were always accompanied by a "*Shit!*" or another appropriate expletive, like some kind of obscene and frustrated radar device.

Finally, another set of double doors let our heroes into a massive room with a tall ceiling and walls so wide they looked like a cavern.

"It looks like some kind of factory," Lexaeus mused quietly, taking in their surroundings. The walls were lined with all sorts of pipes and electrical wires stitching in and out of various contraptions and large conveyer belts all across the room. In the high shadows by the ceiling, a sharp eye could pick out what looked like grotesque mannequins hanging from long hooks in perfectly straight lines that stretched across the room.

"Like an assembly line... This must be where they make the Bishonen Gutless," Vexen added, staring around the room to distract himself from Xaldin frantically finger-combing the new sparkling locks that had sprouted from his possessed sideburn and hairdo.

"I thought the Gutless were only created when a being lost its... you know," Lexaeus asked.

"I thought so too, initially," Vexen murmured, flipping through the guidebook for his notes. "But look at them there on the ceiling... that one's a Preppy. Remember, from that stupid high school?"

"I see a Mary Sue, too," Xaldin put in, looking around the room for perhaps a paper bag to wear over his head. "And several Otaku... Perhaps, like Heartless, they can be synthetically created?"

The further they walked into the cavernous room, the more technologically sophisticated the equipment on the walls began to look. Soon they were striding past vast computer monitors displaying stretches of gibberish numbers. Rows of test

tubes and beakers in display cases bubbled and brewed chemical solutions in all the colors of the rainbow. By the time they were nearing the wall at the far end of the room, they had stepped into the science lab of Vexen's sweetest dreams.

"They have a matter converter," Vexen said jealously, walking over to examine one of the devices. "I haven't even got a matter converter."

"What have they been creating here?" Lexaeus gave a test tube a tentative shake, watching the contents swirling around inside.

Xaldin stepped up to one of the computer stations and tapped the keyboard a few times. "Let's see if we can find out."

"They have an ion splicer," Vexen's eyes narrowed as he honed in on a particularly nasty-looking device. "I haven't even got an ion splicer! Xemnas said they would put me too far over budget!"

"I must give the Gutless some credit," Lexaeus commented, "I wouldn't have thought them intelligent enough to have a laboratory of this caliber."

"They have an automatic cappuccino machine!" Vexen shouted suddenly, slamming his fist on the lab table. "I haven't even got a cappuccino machine! That's it. Xemnas is going to hear about this—I demand I get some reimbursement after all this nonsense is over!"

"Bingo," Xaldin whispered, stumbling upon a spreadsheet filled to the brim with data. "I think I've found something useful," he announced.

With another click, a cheerful animated paper clip appeared on screen. "**Hello!**" read its dialogue box, "**It looks like you're creating a sinister plot to take over the universe! Macrohard Exceed can help you with this task. What would you like to do?**"

Ignoring the little fellow, Xaldin clicked through several of the open windows until he brought up a spreadsheet that appeared to have been updated very recently.

"This is a list of strains of the Gutless parasite," he said quickly. "Look at this, gentlemen!"

Vexen and Lexaeus peered over his shoulder as he scrolled down the list.

"PARASITE WORM: 100 PERCENT COMPLETE

PREPPY: 100 PERCENT COMPLETE

MARY SUE: 100 PERCENT COMPLETE

OTAKU: 100 PERCENT COMPLETE

MOO: 100 PERCENT COMPLETE

BISHONEN: 100 PERCENT COMPLETE

OOC STRAIN (NOBODY SEME/UKE): 100 PERCENT COMPLETE

OOC STRAIN (SEME/UKE): 98 PERCENT COMPLETE

NOTE TO SELF: **TEST YAOI CANNON.**

OTHER NOTE TO SELF: CALL STELLA RE: SUNDAY BRUNCH"

"Somebody's put a lot of work into these figures," Lexaeus commented as Xaldin continued scanning down the list to what appeared to be a byline. "'LOVE AND KISSES, MANSEX XOXOXO'."

"They have been creating the Gutless synthetically," Xaldin said, an epiphany dawning. "See? Look at this column. It's got their production numbers."

"But they've also figured out how to infect people with the same Gutless strains as they've been creating," Lexaeus added. "In the next column over there's numbers for that."

"Look at the 'OOC Strain' for Nobodies," Xaldin pointed to a number. "It says they've only created eight of them. That must be the strain of the parasite that attacked the castle. Those eight must be the members of Organization XIII besides ourselves."

"But there's ten besides us," Lexaeus raised an eyebrow.

"It's not counting Larxene. She wasn't Ukefied, remember?"

"Oh, yes. I see... You're right. And it must not be including Roxas, either, since his signal read he was still all right."

"So there's only been eight of them," Xaldin mused. "That means our Organization

members are the only Semes and Ukes to have been created at this point."

Vexen had been quiet for a long time, one hand grasping his chin and his eyes someplace far away and fixed in deep thought. He finally cleared his throat and extended a gloved finger to the screen.

"Does anyone else find it interesting," he said, "That there's a separate OOC strain listed for Nobodies?"

Xaldin and Lexaeus looked where he was pointing, then nodded.

"The next strain down doesn't have any numbers by it. It's only 98 percent complete," Vexen pondered out loud. "It's also not specifically labeled for Nobodies, nor for any other species. If I knew how to correctly glean theories and observations from numerical data—and I do—I'd guess that as of now, Nobodies are the only ones affected by the Gutless strain that creates Semes and Ukes."

"That would make perfect sense," Lexaeus's eyes widened a bit. "Think back. Of all the people we've encountered in Fandom Hearts so far, only Nobodies have become Semes and Ukes when exposed to the parasite."

"So that would mean," Xaldin squinted at the screen. "That they're working on a method of transmitting the OOC strain to anyone, Nobody or no!"

The gravity of this situation took a moment to dawn on our heroes. They briefly imagined a universe under the tyrannical rule of the Gutless, the worlds populated only by mindless zombie slaves like the Bishonen, obnoxious and shallow stereotypes like the Semes, ungodly annoying weenies like the Ukes...

"Oh *hell*," Lexaeus said succinctly after a moment.

"But it's only 98 percent complete," Xaldin said with a smirk. "There must be some of the research or even samples of the strain around here somewhere. We can find them and destroy them before they have a chance to finish it and use it!"

"Right!" Vexen pounded his fist into his palm. "Quick, Xaldin, ask the little paper clip to find us the files on the OOC strain."

"What would you like to do?" the paperclip repeated happily as Xaldin brought up its window.

"SABOTAGE SINISTER PLOT TO TAKE OVER UNIVERSE," he typed.

"So you would like to sabotage the sinister plot to take over the universe? Macrohard Exceed has a wizard for that! Click [HERE](#) to begin the Sinister Plot Sabotage Wizard!"

"This seems a little too easy, if you ask me," Vexen grumbled.

A few user-friendly steps later, Xaldin managed to bring up all the spreadsheets of data related to research on the newest OOC strain and sent them to die a fiery death in the oblivion of cyberspace. There was only one file left on the list, one called "Research Subject".

"Splendid," Xaldin smiled, "I think it'll let me kill the research subject through this wizard. Or at least access it. We've dispatched more than a few pathetic things on this journey already, what's one more?"

"Hurry, Xaldin," Lexaeus urged him. "Once we finish this, we can ask the paperclip how to stop the, er... thing on your face."

This thought sent Xaldin into overdrive, clicking and typing frantically until—

"Sorry, you need a password to access the research subject! Please type your password in the space below!"

"Son of a bitch!" Xaldin cursed.

"There's a password hint button!" Vexen shouted, pointing at it. "Click it!"

This brought up the suggestion, **"How do you get into the Secret Seme Employee Lounge?"**

"Through a door?" Lexaeus guessed lamely.

"That's not it," Xaldin groaned.

"Hold on, hold on, this can't be as hard to guess as we think," Vexen chewed his lip. "If it's a secret lounge, then I suppose you'd have to be a Seme to get in there, right?"

"What if you try typing the names of all the Semes?" Lexaeus offered. "In order?"

There was a short moment of silence, and Xaldin glanced over his shoulder.

"So, the password is 'Xiggykun Akuchan Marleydono HomieXLuxory Secks DemykinsOMGWTFBBQVCR Zexypoo Mansex?'" he somehow pronounced.

"That has to be the most ludicrous password I've ever heard of!" Vexen snapped in disgust.

"It makes sense with the password hint," Lexaeus shrugged.

"That's moronic! For one thing, that password is 59 characters over the limit for a password," Vexen ranted. "For another... IT'S STUPID! What kind of idiot puts a password like that on their computer?"

"A Mansex kind of idiot," Xaldin rolled his eyes. "Remember who we're talking about, gentlemen. It's the Seme of the Nobody of the Heartless of the obsessive former apprentice of Ansem the Wise, who, if I recall what Dilan remembered correctly, also had an affinity for exceptionally dumb passwords."

"Even never used that computer," Vexen murmured. "How stupid was it?"

"Elaeus used it every so often, and it was *stupid*," Lexaeus told him.

By now, Xaldin had finished inputting the password and with a short breath, hit the enter button.

"Password Accepted! Now connecting with Hidden Specimen Slab Trap Door... Please wait..."

"Good grief," Vexen groaned, rubbing his forehead like he was getting a severe migraine.

"Hidden Specimen Slab Trap Door!" Lexaeus took a step back. "Yes, this is it!"

The three of them waited with bated breath as the progress bar slowly filled, and finally clicked to a stop—

"Sorry, we were unable to connect with your Angry Scientist™ Brand Hidden Specimen Slab Trap Door Model 4.5!" the paperclip cheerfully apologized. **"We need to know the make and model of your Hidden Specimen Slab Trap Door in order to make the connection!"**

"But you just put the make and model—for the love of—!" Xaldin growled and input the command again.

"Sorry, we were unable to connect with your Angry Scientist™ Brand Hidden Specimen Slab Trap Door Model 4.5! Maybe there's a connection loose somewhere? I bet that's what it is, and you're going to feel like a major jackass if that's it, aren't you?"

"There's a troubleshooting menu!" Vexen pointed. "Click the troubleshooting menu!"

"I don't need you backseat typing for me, Vexen!" Xaldin snapped, interrupted as another piece of his hair exploded into sparkly majesty. "AGH!"

"I've got an Angry Scientist™ in my lab back at the castle, they do this from time to time. If you would just click the—get your hands back on the keyboard!"

"Shut it, Vexen!"

Lexaeus stepped up and applied his open palm—hard—to the back of the monitor.

It flickered and when the screen came up again, the progress bar was loading again.

"Macrohard Exceed is auto-opening your Angry Scientist™ Brand Hidden Specimen Slab Trap Door Model 4.5! Thank you for using the wizard!"

"Well, there," Xaldin exhaled, combing through his braids (and the few tufts of luxurious Uke hair) with his hands.

There came the sound of machinery clicking into gear, and suddenly a section of the empty floor in the center of the room rose up. It separated into halves and slid off to the side as one deluxe model Angry Scientist™ Brand Hidden Specimen Slab Trap Door began to rise up out of the floor, whatever unfortunate research subject it held captive hidden beneath a shiny retracting chrome protection bubble.

"Here we are," Lexaeus said, grasping his tomahawk out of nowhere behind him. "Now, when the bubble opens, we kill it and put an end to this nonsense."

Our heroes stood in a semi-circle around the rising slab, weapons at the ready and prepared for just about anything to be concealed beneath the chrome bubble. Finally, the slab clicked into a secure position, the bubble retracted back and—

"Merciful *darkness*," Vexen stared in horror.

Roxas lay strapped to the slab, deep in some comatose dream.

"Why so shaky, Mansex? You look dreadful."

Indeed, Mansex had seen better days, even in his short lifespan as a Seme. He was trembling and weak, kneeling there in reverence before the dark shadow in the throne at the far end of the highest room in the Darkest Tower. His skin and hair were coated with soot and debris from the Yaoi Cannon's explosion, and his body seemed to be glowing with a soft light the same color as the late superweapon's beam.

"Why don't you say something when your mistress addresses you?"

Mansex opened his mouth to speak but could not, shaking and trembling so hard all he could do is make vague stuttering noises.

"Oh, I see. You were hit by the runoff from the Yaoi Cannon, weren't you?" her voice tilted in amusement and she crossed her legs, lounging in her throne. "Because you were too stupid to take the weapon I gave you and use it efficiently, it backfired on you and now you're so full of yaoi energy your feeble little Seme body can't take it, can it?"

Mansex lurched, reaching up a shaky hand as though requesting a moment to speak. Once again, all he got out was either helpless gibberish or a very good impression of an outboard motor trying to start.

"You didn't lose the Tupperware, did you?"

Mansex shook his head, breathing heavily. He reached into the tatters of his pink coat and pulled out the unharmed Tupperware, you knows still drifting lazily inside like nothing had happened.

"Very good," the Grand Master Fangirl sighed. "Well, Mansex, seeing as you are the only Seme I have left at the moment, I suppose it's all right for me to tell you the nature of your condition. You see, really, the potential for a Seme's power is limitless... I simply chose to put a harness on how powerful you and the rest of the Orgy were to keep you from getting out of hand."

She shifted a bit in her seat and sat up straight. "But seeing as we are in something of a desperate situation here... the Nobodies on their way to destroy us

and all... I suppose it wouldn't be out of the question for me to increase your potential. Would you like that, Mansex? If I allowed you to utilize all that lovely new power the Yaoi Cannon surged into you?"

He burst out into mad giggles, nodding and shaking with anticipation.

"Very well," the Grand Master Fangirl smirked and pulled a laptop computer off the side table and into her lap. "And in return, you will head downstairs and utterly destroy those Nobody nuisances... then bring their you knows to me."

Pink light suddenly burst from Mansex's body, engulfing him and twisting around him, transforming him from head to toe.

The Grand Master Fangirl smiled.

Some quick work with a paperclip and a convenient nearby rubber band allowed our three heroes to release Roxas from the metal bonds that strapped him to the slab. Lexaeus lifted the teenage Nobody up by the shoulders and leaned close to examine him.

"He seems to be all right," he said, "Just very asleep."

"The guidebook is going berserk," Vexen snarled, flipping through its pages and ignoring the flashing computer signals. "It's detecting Gutless parasites within his body—and massive amounts of them, too."

"And yet, he's not an Uke," Xaldin puzzled to himself. "He's still a Nobody. What were they doing to him?"

"They used him as a test subject for their new strain of the parasite," Lexaeus murmured, "But they didn't try to take his... you know. Why?"

Vexen looked to be in another one of his moments of deep concentration. He glanced from Roxas to his two companions, and thought back to the rest of the Organization and their Semes...

"The OOC strain only affects Nobodies at this point, correct?" he said after a moment.

"As far as we know, correct," Xaldin nodded.

"So we must think," Vexen frowned and crossed his arms. "'Roxas is a Nobody. All the rest of us are Nobodies. What does Roxas have that none of the rest of us have?"

Xaldin and Lexaeus looked at each other, then at Vexen.

"If you already know what it is, why don't you just tell us?" Xaldin said irritably.

Vexen smirked. He did love being the superbly intellectual one. "Roxas has a Somebody," he explained. "That is, a Somebody who is still alive."

"Of course!" Lexaeus pounded his fist into his palm. "That makes perfect sense! They're trying to create a strain of the parasite that can work on anybody, aren't they?"

"They're using Roxas to create that strain," Xaldin continued, biting his lip. "By creating the parasite within him, it will be easier for the parasite to pass to Roxas' human Somebody. And once that one human contracts the parasite, it'll spread to other humans..."

"We've got to find some way to stop this thing before it's too late," Vexen growled. "We've got to come up with a cure!"

"Ooooh... I'm afraid that won't be *possible*, darlings."

The trio turned just in time to see a familiar shadow hovering above them, a shadow that glowed with a faint evil light. Laughter echoed across the cavernous room and the shadow crossed its arms.

"What a shame, to have come so far and worked so hard to get here... and all for nothing. You even did a remarkable job of gathering the clues to our maniacal plot. How unfortunate, then, that it's time for the three of you to SUBMIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!"

"Mansex!" Xaldin snarled, calling down his lances. "You BASTARD! You'll pay for what you've done to me, and to our Organization!"

"I was meaning to comment on your new 'do, hotcakes," Mansex giggled insanely as he floated down into the light. His bright pink coat had been repaired, now dotted with sparkling rhinestones in a wild zebra pattern and even more feather boa. "HEEHEHEHEHEE! It's almost halfway there now, isn't it? Soon you'll become an Uke, and your Seme will stand and fight beside me... and you'll be absolutely helpless to resist!"

"We're going to kill you," Lexaeus announced, scooping Roxas up off the slab and slinging him over his shoulder for safekeeping. He drew his tomahawk and backed towards his allies. "You really think your half-baked plot for universal domination is going to work? Do you really think you can turn everyone into freaks like you?"

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, my attractive muscular friend," Mansex cackled. "You've entirely misinterpreted our plot! Do you still think this is just a plot to take over Organization XIII? How PATHETIC!" He tossed his head, fluffing his hair this way and that luxuriously. "You stupid fools! Our goal is to take over the entire UNIVERSE! Everyone, Nobodies, humans and all will become victims of our parasite!"

"Yes, ah... we knew that," Vexen replied icily, drawing his shield.

"You did?" Mansex gaped.

"Yes. How long were you standing there?" Vexen put his hands on his hips. "We've spent the past eight pages figuring out your evil plot. Unless there's some kind of horrible secret part of it we managed to miss, I assume we've got you figured-"

"THE HORRIBLE SECRET PART!" Mansex interrupted suddenly, throwing his hands up in the air. "YES! The HORRIBLE secret part of our plan, so evil, so sinister, so horrible and secret there is no way you could have figured it out! BWAHAHAHHAAAA!"

"And just what is it?" Xaldin gritted his teeth.

"The pathetic teenage Nobody you hold so delicately over your shoulder!" Mansex howled with laughter, gesturing to Lexaeus. "He is no ordinary Nobody, OH NO! As we speak, his body is INFESTED with the Gutless parasite! And soon, the parasite will mature, and it will pass over into the Canon Universe and infect his Somebody, Sora! And then, as the Keybearer makes his journeys to save the worlds, he will pass the infection on to every person in every world in every universe! Soon, we the Gutless will rule over ALL! And it is all because of the ticking timebomb you hold slung over your shoulder! BWAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Yes, we, uh, we knew that too," Lexaeus informed him.

"You did?" Mansex looked horrified. "But HOW?"

"Again, we've been figuring out most of this stuff for the past eight pages," Xaldin reminded him.

"Well, uh..." Mansex glowered, reaching into his robes and pulling out his copy of **Toadying For the Final Boss For Fun and Profit** and flipping to Chapter 24, "Sinister Exposition: Revealing Your Evil Plot At A Climactic Moment". He scanned over it for a moment, then stuffed it back into his pocket in frustration.

"Well then!" he yelled. "How unfortunate for you! You've come all this way and labored so long and hard, and gathered all of those you knows only to lose them at the last minute! And now, after all that work, you're to fall here at the end and lose your you knows to the Gutless! How sad!"

"And just who is going to take our you knows?" Vexen sneered. "You?"

"That's right," Mansex cackled. "For there is one more horrible secret part that you DON'T know about!"

"And that is...?" Xaldin gestured for him to elaborate.

Mansex grinned, closed his eyes and crossed his hands over his chest. Pink light engulfed his body and his silhouette began to grow. His coat grew longer, pinker, sparklier. His hair puffed up and curled and twisted in on itself, stretching out to the length of his arms. There was a ripping noise and tremendous, sparkling wings with frilly feathers of all different colors grew from his back, the scent of apple blossom body lotion wafting through the air.

"GET A LOAD OF ME NOW, BOYS!" Mansex shrieked in a high-pitched giggle.

The light faded away and the figure before them could be none other than Mansex's second form. Mansex Squared. Mansex Redux. Mansex Two: Electric Boogaloo.

But his absolutely glamorous hair and outfit upgrades were not the most horrifying new features about him. No, that would probably be the miniature Yaoi Cannons strapped to the underside of his arms and in a rather unfortunate wardrobe decision, to the top of his rhinestone codpiece.

Lexaeus turned off to the side and abruptly threw up.

"Yes, yessssss!" Mansex's voice had changed too, making him sound something like a cross between Darth Vader and Rip Taylor. "Cower! Cowerrrrrr!"

"Oh, we're cowering, all right," Xaldin choked down a gag reflex, turned away from the hideous sight. His right sideburn was standing straight on end and had it a

voice, it would have screamed in agony. It actually *hurt*.

"I can't see," Vexen announced shakily. "I cannot see. My retinas have committed suicide."

Lexaeus did not reply. He was coughing up blood.

"It is unfortunate you are too weak to handle me in all my glory!" Mansex cackled, placing his hands on his hips and posing in an even more unfortunate manner. "And now, my friends... It's time to say goodbye to your you knows!"

"It can't end like this!" Vexen yelled in fury. "It won't end like this!"

"Of course it won't," Xaldin said reasonably, "There's still two chapters left."

"One chapter and an epilogue, you stupid fool!" Mansex corrected him. And with that, he fired up his cannon.

And my, how I regret typing that.

Cliffhangers. They suck, but there's really no better way to keep people screaming for more. BWAHAHAHHA.

I apologize for the rampant stupidity in this chapter, but hey, it made you laugh, didn't it? And it's not as stupid as, say, a 47-letter computer password comprised of Disney princess names, am I right? Eh? Eh?

Thanks for reading, and you all have a fantastic day.

March of the Black Queen

Chapter Twelve: March of the Black Queen

There is really no comfortable way for the author to relay the climactic events of the previous chapter to you before she embarks on this, the penultimate episode of the epic quest of Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus and their battles against all that is confusing and mentally-scarring. Suffice it to say, the three of them had never been in quite this serious a quandary before. That included the time they lost their hearts, several of the full-scale Heartless attacks on the castle, and the time Zexion was in charge of cooking the Organization's annual four-course formal Festivus dinner. Oysters were still completely banned in The World That Never Was.

In any case, suffice it to say that our three heroes were in a great deal of peril at the hands and unfortunately-placed pointy weapons of Mansex, Evil Evolved. Mansex, the Next Generation. Mansex, the Empire Strikes Back. Mansex! Part Deux!

Lexaeus was barely able to keep Roxas's unconscious body on his shoulder as he covered his mouth and turned away from the horrific sight, the taste of bile and blood stinging his tongue. "Xaldin—Vexen—" he choked out between heaves, "Do something!"

"There's NOTHING you can do!" Mansex howled with laughter, and a whirring noise that accompanied the unfortunate swaggering of his hips signaled the completion of the Yaoi Cannon's charge. "Now, spend a final moment suffering under the realization that you have FAILED!"

"We'll do that, thank you," Xaldin said shakily. His body was frozen in place, presumably a defense mechanism adopted by his non-corrupted sentient sideburn to protect its host from the unimaginable consequences of looking directly at Mansex.

"I can't believe this," Vexen whispered.

"What, that we're about to have our you knows ripped out and suffer an eternity of servitude at the whim of a crazed, ultra-powerful faceless entity?" Xaldin queried.

"No—my eyes are apparently capable of deactivating themselves reflexively," Vexen marveled, the oddly-timed marvel of a scientist who within seconds would be unable to ever marvel again. "It's absolutely fascinating. I wish I'd known about this

sooner."

"Your moment is up!" Mansex announced, jutting out his hips in a traumatic fashion. "Now, I shall begin the countdown to your destruction! It's been fun, my rebellious little friends... but NOBODY—and I do mean *Nobody* can possibly hope to triumph over the power of the Grand Master Fangirl! TEN!"

A collective gasp sounded from the throats of our heroes.

"NINE!"

One of the lab machines whirred in the background.

"EIGHT!"

Had the Nobodies hearts, they would have skipped a beat.

"SIX!"

"You forgot seven," Lexaeus reminded helpfully, in a dead sort of voice.

"Oh, right. SEVEN!"

Computer monitors beeped and blipped.

"SIX!"

Outside, the Bishonen Gutless moaned their undead chorus and pounded on the wall of ice and stone blocking them from the entrance to the Darkest Tower.

"FIVE!"

The thunder rolled and the lightning struck. Another love grew cold on a sleepless night.

"FOUR!"

Murray, the night janitor, whistled "Zip-a-Dee Doo Dah" as he mopped the third floor men's restroom.

"THREE!"

Some other very suspenseful sound effects occurred.

"TWO!"

There came the crackling of static and suddenly, a female voice cut in over the tower's PA system. "MANSEX!"

"Whaaat?" Mansex groaned back, obviously very upset at the interruption. "I-I mean... YES, my lady! What is it?"

"YOU HAVEN'T DEALT WITH THE INTRUDERS YET, HAVE YOU?"

"No, my lady!" Mansex yelled into the nearest speaker, careful to keep a close watch on the three (make that four, albeit he was unconscious) Nobodies. "I was down to two on their Countdown to Imminent Doom when your eminence interrupted me!"

"OH GOOD," the Grand Master Fangirl sounded pleased. *"I CHANGED MY MIND, MANSEX. BRING THE THREE OF THEM TO ME, UNHARMED."*

"Unharmd? B-but my lady!" Mansex protested. "I wanted to deal with theeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeem!"

"I WILL DEAL WITH THEM MYSELF, MANSEX. NOW IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE HELPING MURRAY WITH THE BATHROOMS FOR THE NEXT SIX WEEKS YOU'LL DO AS I SAY WITHOUT ARGUING. UNDERSTAND?"

"But I just got—my new form and... and my *nails*!" Mansex's voice dipped dangerously towards "whiny four-year-old" frequency.

"DO IT NOW!"

With a heavy sigh, the sigh of an underling denied his shining moment in the spotlight, Mansex let out a labored, "Oo-kaaaaaaay." The loudspeaker silenced and he turned to his three almost-victims, malice and jealousy burning behind his unnatural doe-eyes. "It seems you've been spared for the moment! The Grand Master Fangirl wants to deal with you herself!"

"The Grand Master Fangirl," Xaldin spat poisonously. "We've heard enough about her already. It's about time we meet our archenemy face-to-face."

"I guess that's what she thought too," Mansex huffed, "Because now I have to wait

to blast you with my beautiful cannon!"

"Please don't say things like that," Vexen requested, shivering. "As interesting as my sudden blindness is, I do not want to be deaf as well."

"Poopy," Mansex whined. "Just... just POOPY! Well!" He lowered himself down to the ground and snapped his fingers. "Now! You three, come along quietly or I won't hesitate to pound you!"

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus did not respond to that, staring at him (or in his general direction, in Vexen's case) with dropped jaws.

Mansex rolled his eyes. "Oh, you know what I mean!"

It was a long way up many corridors of winding staircases to the Grand Master Fangirl's Inner Inner Sanctum. Torches flickered their dim light across the empty stone walls, which did nothing to muffle the loud echoing of footsteps as Mansex marched his prisoners up to meet the boss.

Xaldin stared grimly ahead, face set like he was preparing himself for the worst. Vexen found his vision was starting to repair itself now that Mansex was facing away from them, but Lexaeus was still helping to guide him up the stairs with a hand on his shoulder, Roxas still unconscious and slung over his other shoulder—the Gutless parasite within him no doubt festering, maturing, nearing its completion... soon the universe as they knew it would crash down around them in a blaze of glory, entire planets imploding in on themselves and you knows bursting in air—actually, forget I was about to go there. No, no, change of subject.

Mansex, meanwhile, was muttering to himself the entire way, occasionally pulling his ***Toadying For the Final Boss For Fun and Profit*** book out of his robes and flipping through the index, looking for the section on what to do when the Final Boss mistrusts you and requests to deal with your prisoners him/herself. It was a very difficult time in a toady's life, the book's authors Seymour Guado and Jack Krauser advised, and it was important for a toady not to let his low self esteem get the better of him.

"I am a skilled evil toady and I am good at what I do," Mansex kept repeating the mantra to himself, as the book suggested. "The final boss wouldn't be able to execute his/her sinister plans if it weren't for my hard work and dedication. I am an important part of the evil process. My input is vital. I am the best at being me!"

"That's the spirit," Lexaeus encouraged him, for lack of anything better to say.

Finally, the odd little party reached a massive set of double doors at the top of the staircase, engraved with ornate script that read LOL.

"Here we are, gentlemen," Xaldin said grimly.

"I can see again!" Vexen figured considering the circumstances, any kind of encouraging news would be good for group morale.

Mansex tucked his book away and strutted out in front of his prisoners again, turning towards them. "We have arrived!"

"Dammit!" Vexen cursed as he went blind again.

"And so, my friends... the time has come for you to fall into place!" Mansex laughed, backing up against the door in preparation to open it. "Allow me to introduce our beautiful Overlady, the head of our evil empire, the most revered and wonderful future Queen of the Universe... the Grand Master Fangirl!"

He opened the doors with no shortage of panache, and glaringly bright light poured from the room and into the dark corridor. Sinister organ chords blasted so loud they seemed to shake the tower, and far across a cavernous throne room, a cackling female silhouette stood upon a stage, hands on her hips and a scepter tucked under her arm.

"Welcome, my dear guests!" the Grand Master Fangirl laughed maniacally, and the silhouette extended a shadowy hand to beckon them inside. "Come... come closer and meet your queen!"

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus obeyed nervously, squinting in the bright light and bodies tensing as they prepared for the absolute worst. Mansex shuffled behind them, pushing them forward and getting in a few of his own evil giggles.

As our heroes reached the halfway point of the room and as another organ blasted an ominous solo that shook the building, the lights faded away and they got their first clear look at their archenemy, the wicked fourteen-year-old who had created the Gutless, took over Fandom Hearts and single-handedly virtually destroyed Organization XIII.

She wasn't a terribly impressive fourteen-year-old, mousy and short with brown hair carefully curled and woven into an elaborate hairdo, held in place by at least 30

chopsticks. Freckles spattered across her cheeks and nose, and her dark eyes glittered with malice, a malice that seemed to emanate from her body and glint off her braces. Her deep purple gown resembled a complicated cross between a Japanese kimono and the massive ball gowns traditionally imagined appropriate for a queen, with a collar so tall it nearly extended over her head. Around her neck hung an impressive collection of Square-Enix commemorative silver jewelry, as worn by the protagonists of basically every Square-Enix game ever made.

"The Grand Master Fangirl and the head of the Gutless empire is a fourteen-year-old girl?" Xaldin said in mock surprise. "Was that supposed to be surprising?"

"Xaldin, this is a Square-Enix production," Lexaeus scolded him. "Do you really think they'd base an entire storyline upon a plot point that ninety percent of the audience guessed within a few minutes?"

"But what about Roxas and the fact he was Sora's—" Vexen began, but was hurriedly shushed by the lawyers off-screen threatening to set his contract on fire.

"Mansex!" she boomed in a voice that sounded quite a bit less intimidating in person than it did over the loudspeaker. "Finally! At last you have brought them to me... the three *monsters* responsible for nearly upsetting our wonderful plan!"

"Yes, my lady!" Mansex said boastfully, tossing up his head and looking extra proud of himself as he made his way over to stand nearby her. "I have done just as you asked. Now—what shall we do with them?"

"Will you be patient?" The Fangirl snapped her fingers. "Be silent! I want to talk to them before I destroy them!"

Mansex's lip stuck out like a pouting child's. "B-but whyyyy?" he wailed. "I want to fire my cannons at them noooow!"

"Anticipation is half the pleasure, Mansex," the Fangirl scolded him.

"B-but I can't WAIT! I'm going to BURST!"

"Don't blow your wad all at once, Mansex! Now sit down over there and think about baseball, or do a puzzle or something—and shut up!"

Mansex let out a little sob and crossed his arms, refusing to look at his mistress in protest. Meanwhile, our three heroes stood in wide-eyed horror. Well, Vexen was

wide-eyed because he'd been blinded, but you knew that.

"What is going on over there?" Vexen asked disgustedly.

"Oh, sex humor," Xaldin sighed.

"I thought so. She's clearly running out of ideas," Vexen concluded.

"'She'? The Grand Master Fangirl?" asked Lexaeus.

"No, no," Vexen shook his head, delicately to avoid throwing himself off balance without the aid of his vision. "The author."

"The what? Vexen," Xaldin groaned, "We have no time for your ridiculous conspiracy theories about an author!"

"That's RIGHT!" the Grand Master Fangirl interjected from her throne. She took a few strutting steps out towards the edge of her royal platform. "I think you'll find, gentlemen—the only author in this grand conspiracy is myself! I, the beautiful and almighty overlady of Fandom Hearts—The Grand Master Fangirl!"

"Oh, we've heard of you," Xaldin took a cocky step forward of his own, one hand still clutched to cover up his ailing sideburn. "You're the villain behind this whole plot!"

"Villain? Oh, I think not, you furry-faced fink!" the Fangirl cackled in maniacal glee. "You three are the villains! You—you three hideous *non-bishies*, trying so hard to interrupt the magnificent universe I had planned!"

"Your universe is nothing but the twisted dreaming of an immature little twit with far too much time on her hands," Lexaeus pointed an accusatory finger at her. "And we WON'T let you get away with what you've done!"

"Oh really?" the Fangirl giggled. "How do you think you can stop me now, hmm? Do you think I haven't noticed the cute little hairdo Mansex gave you? Do you think I don't know that the sexy little beast you've got slung over your shoulder there is *crawling* with my beautiful Gutless? And any minute now, the sinfa—um... synth... synthe... synthesith..."

"Ssssssssynthessssssisssss," Mansex offered helpfully.

"—the THAT!" the Fangirl said triumphantly, "—of the parasite will be complete!

Roxy-Woxy will give birth—"

"*Ugh*," the Nobodies shuddered in unison.

"—He will give birth to a parasite like none ever seen before; a parasite that can corrupt the you knows of ALL beings! Nobodies, Heartless, humans, females—"

"But females are ICKY!" Mansex complained.

"And would probably be filed under 'humans', if you were to be specific," Vexen corrected.

"Will you all STOP interrupting me?" the Fangirl screeched.

"Sorry," the Nobodies and Mansex apologized.

"ANYWAY!" the Fangirl raised her scepter high into the air like a magic wand, doing a pirouette and grinning wickedly at her prisoners. "To make a long story short!"

"Twelve chapters too late," Xaldin lamented.

"I, the Grand Master Fangirl, shall gain dominion over ALL the universes, not just Fandom Hearts! Even canon shall bow to my will! The whole universe will become my wonderful paradise, my playground where anything can happen the way I say, everyone will act the way I say—my dreams shall all come true!" With this the Fangirl gave a loving sigh and sprawled herself out in her throne, batting her eyelashes with eyes far away, presumably in the visions of her beautiful new world.

"That won't happen," Lexaeus spoke between clenched teeth. "We won't let it happen."

"Oh please," the Fangirl chuckled, "Tell me you've figured it out by now—that what you say and do has no bearing on the situation? You're all just my characters in the grand scheme of things!"

"We are not *your* characters!" Vexen seethed. "We've come to stop you!"

"And you think you would have made it this far if I hadn't wanted you to?" the Fangirl giggled. "You—the three of you, and ALL your little Organization friends? You're just characters! Characters in a story! I've been in control all along! Your every triumph, your every defeat—I orchestrated it all! You're all helpless before

me!"

"What?" Xaldin gaped. "That's... that's impossible! We've operated on our own free will—no one, and most certainly you have not told us what to do!"

"Well, no... not yet," the Fangirl grinned. "The Gutless parasite? THAT is the key to my control. People from your universe can't come into mine unless they've got one..."

"So you're bluffing," Vexen sneered. "You can only control beings from your own universe—and you can only control beings from ours if they are infected."

"That's right. The moment you stepped into Fandom Hearts without the Gutless parasite, you were able to rebel against my control," the Fangirl went on. "But the Semes, created from the captured... you knows of your comrades? The beings you've encountered along the way, on every world? They're all mine. They're nothing but characters—words in the script I have written!"

"This is an oddly sophisticated evil villainous plot speech coming from a fourteen year old," Lexaeus commented.

"Thank you! I've been studying," the Fangirl held up a copy of ***Final Bossing For Fun and Profit***, the back pages of which held cliff notes for her entire speech thus far.

"Oy," Lexaeus rolled his eyes.

"Ah but don't act so cocky, my friends!" the Fangirl sat up, crossing her legs in what she thought must have been a seductive manner. "You act as though you can still stop me—but you forget, your cute little friend there is a festering, heartless sack of parasites about to unleash themselves on the entire universe. And even you won't be able to resist those little beauties!"

"What's wrong, Fangirl?" Xaldin smirked at her. "Change your mind? I thought the three of us were too ugly for you to want under your control!"

"Well I changed my mind—you're more trouble than you're worth without it!" she snapped. "And you're one to be getting cocky with me, Mister Xaldin—you're even closer to my grasp than your friends! Your sideburn... I can hear it calling out to me! In minutes, you too will fall under my spell and your Seme will be mine!"

"Oh hell," Xaldin swore, his bubble promptly burst.

"So as you can see," the Fangirl sighed and relaxed in her throne, "Though your valiant efforts to thwart my evil schemes were impressive, they were all in vain! In minutes I shall rule ALL of the universe—and you can do nothing to stop me! BWAHAHAHAHAHHAA!"

And with that, the Fangirl indulged herself with a hearty round of maniacal laughter that lasted a good two and a half minutes. Mansex felt inclined to join in after about thirty seconds, and as the two of them guffawed together, our heroes took the opportunity to huddle together.

"Well, now what?" Lexaeus sighed.

"It would seem we are..." Vexen murmured.

"Lost for options?" Xaldin suggested.

"In a tight spot?" Lexaeus added.

"Between a rock in a hard place?"

"In hot water?"

"Verily fucked," Vexen answered.

"Ah."

"None of that downtrodden speech!" Lexaeus boomed. "We haven't come this far to give up now! Or do the two of you WANT to become prancing, humiliating stereotypes of ourselves forevermore?"

"I will NOT become a hillbilly child molester!" Vexen seethed, as Xaldin was quite distracted by a popping noise and another of his braids transforming into feet of flowing luxuriousness that would have Pantene models screaming in envy.

"There must be something we can do—something we've overlooked..." Lexaeus murmured. "She talks tough, but she can't have covered all her bases—does that sound like the moron we've been battling for all these chapters?"

"There must be something..." Xaldin repeated, numbly fingering his remaining braids.

Across the hall, the Grand Master Fangirl and Mansex seemed to be settling

down. They wiped tears of mirth from their eyes and took several deep breaths, finally sliding down into their seats—the Fangirl in her throne and Mansex sprawled out on a lowered section of the platform that seemed to be his spot—**Toadying For the Final Boss for Fun and Profit** called this "The Toady Throne" and it served as the center of a toady's "Intimidation Sphere", where s/he would stand to absorb the maximum amount of his/her master's evil chi. This evil chi raised the toady's sense of self-worth and provided a boost in his/her belief in his/her own evilness.

The maniacal laughter ceased. Silence broke through the cavernous chamber and nobody dared to speak. Mansex did, though, quietly clearing his throat. "Mistress?"

"Yes, Mansex?" the Fangirl asked, far away in a little daydream.

"May we... deal with them now?" he asked, sticking out his lip in a pout that would have been cute were it not coming from a full grown man with a cannon on his codpiece.

"Deal with who, Mansex?"

"Why," Mansex licked his lips and eyed the Nobodies hungrily, "The pathetic little worms through whose antics your flawless plan for universal domination was almost thwarted, my lady!"

"Oh... yes," the Fangirl smiled sedately. "I almost forgot. Silly me!"

"Hell!" Lexaeus swore under his breath.

"I... I can see again!" Vexen figured considering the circumstances, any kind of encouraging news would be good for group morale.

The Grand Master Fangirl rose from her throne. "Now, we must go about this the right way, Mansex—stand and face them proudly."

Mansex about-faced towards our heroes, who bunched a little closer together out of instinct.

"Dammit!" Vexen cursed as he went blind again.

"And prepare yourself, Mansex," the Fangirl whispered.

"Oh yes," Mansex smiled, and energy flowed through his body. His multiple cannons began to charge with the same bright light as before, emitting a glow that

surrounded him and lit up the dark corners of the room. His limbs felt light and free, his heartless chest like there was a feeling building up within him, stronger and stronger, more and more until he can hardly control it. "Yes!"

"Are you prepared?"

"Yes, I..." Mansex roared. "I FEEL IT! I FEEL THE COSMOS! I'M READY, MISTRESS!"

"Then meet your doom!"

"YES- Pardon?" Mansex turned abruptly around just in time to see the last second or so of the Fangirl's gesture with her staff—the gesture that sent his body crumpling in upon itself and then, suddenly, exploding—the energy overtook him and he screamed in agony, the explosion rocking the entire building from its very foundation.

The Nobodies ducked and covered just in time to avoid smoking bits and pieces of Mansex flying in all directions, beginning as chunks but then evanescent into the familiar purple glow in mid-splat against the wall. A great smoking crater was all that remained of the horrifying Seme—until his one-armed torso came tumbling down after ricocheting off the high ceiling of the chamber, slamming into the tile and skidding a few feet before coming to a stop.

The Nobodies watched in awe as against all logic, Mansex's fingers twitched and he pushed what remained of himself up off the floor. Shaking and shivering, he turned just enough to face his smiling mistress.

"M-MY LADY..." he choked out hoarsely. "WH...WHY!"

"Did you really think I'd forgive you for your previous failure, Mansex?" the Grand Master Fangirl huffed and turned away from him. "Your idiocy could have cost me my paradise! I had to deal with you *somehow*."

"B-by... by dessssssstroying me!" Mansex squeaked.

"Chapter 29 of ***Final Bossing For Fun and Profit***," the Fangirl dug out her copy of the thick book, flipping past the author introductions by Ganondorf and Yu Yevon, past Chapter 4, "Kidnapping is Fun-napping!". She flipped beyond Chapter 13, "On Security Features For Your Evil Stronghold", past Chapter 23, "Falling In Love With A Main Character And Why it Could Work For You", all the way to the back of the book. "Here it is. Chapter 29—'Murder Your Most Trusted Toady At the Last Minute

To Show You Mean Business'."

"Th...thissss can't be..." Mansex fumbled around on the floor until he found his own book, checking the table of contents. "Ah...AH! Chapter 30—'Newsflash! Your Boss Is Going To Kill You: Learning to Cope!'"

The Seme's expression melted into one of utter heartbreak and he gazed up, taking one last look at the Nobodies he failed to yaoi-blast and the mistress who had betrayed him.

"POOPY!" he screamed, and vanished into purple you know. It floated delicately in the air above the crater made by its former shape, then gently flowed towards the Fangirl, who caught it in her staff.

"There," she smacked her lips in satisfaction. "Now I can get on with things without that obnoxious twit bothering me!"

"I can see again," Vexen announced. "Just so you know."

"You are ruthless," Lexaeus murmured to the Fangirl, leaning down and carefully depositing Roxas in a safe location off to the side. He never took his eyes off the volatile fourteen-year-old, though. "You'd kill your own man just because he didn't act exactly the way you wanted him to."

"Of course!" the Grand Master Fangirl huffed. "I'm the author here! If I don't like the way things are going, I MAKE them go my way!"

"No, no, no!" Xaldin shook his head rapidly, as soft piano music began to play in the background. "In writing—particularly in writing fan work, half of the challenge is fitting into the universe which you've been given."

"That's right," Lexaeus cut in. "In any work of fiction, you have before you the restrictions placed by the world in which the story takes place, or the characters that you have chosen to work with—either those you have invented yourself, or those who you have borrowed to do something new with."

"In any case," Vexen went on as the piano music soared, "The true challenge of writing is to take what you are given and, sticking to it, make it work—change the readers in some way! Tug at their emotions, make them laugh, make them indignant—make them hate or love someone by working within the restrictions! If you throw those restrictions away—if you do whatever you want? The effectiveness is lost. It's nothing but ramblings—nonsensical ramblings that don't mean a thing."

"Who's playing that bloody piano?" Xaldin interrupted.

"Oh," Murray the night janitor lifted his hands from the keys abruptly. "Sorry!"

"We're trying to talk over here," Lexaeus complained.

Vexen rolled his eyes. "Some people. *Rude*."

"In any case!" the Fangirl snapped, "I don't HAVE to listen to you! This is my world and I can do whatever I want in it!"

"Whatever the excuse," Xaldin smirked, "That was pointless—killing Mansex did nothing but remove the only defense you had against the three of us launching an assault against you."

"What's that you say?" the Fangirl asked, giggling.

"He said," Lexaeus paused and raised his hand across the floor—his tomahawk came flying out of wherever it was and he armed himself, raising it up. "That you just took out your only defense."

Vexen summoned his shield and held it menacingly, "And that means that you've just made a *very* stupid mistake."

Xaldin called down his lances in a burst of wind, and our three heroes stood in their most bad-ass and box-artish poses. "And as such," Xaldin sneered at the Fangirl, "For the threat you've posed to our Organization—and our universe—we're going to destroy you now."

"Oh... hahaha," the Fangirl grinned, giggling under her breath. "Ha ha ha! HAHAAHAHAHA!" She broke into another epically long fit of maniacal giggles, clutching her sides with mirth and trying hard not to fall over in her throes of laughter.

"That's unsettling," Lexaeus said succinctly.

After a few calming snorts, the Fangirl seemed to have regained control of herself. She wiped tears from her eyes and took a proud step forward, striking her best Sailor Moon pose and gesturing dramatically at our heroes.

"THAT'S WHERE YOU ARE WROOOONG!" she howled, and from behind her cloak she withdrew a gleaming Tupperware.

"Oh," Lexaeus suddenly winced. "I *almost* forgot about that."

"That's right!" the Fangirl grinned cheesily, and waved her hand mystically around the Tupperware. "Don't forget, my little friends, as long as I have this, I have a major trump card against you! If I destroy your friend's... you knows... you'll have lost anyway!"

"That may be a trump card, but you're definitely bluffing," Xaldin challenged her. "If you destroy the... you knows, then the Semes are lost to you."

"But only for another... oh, my best guess would be ten minutes," Vexen reminded Xaldin, casting a nervous half-glance at Roxas, still resting peacefully in his safe corner of the room. "When Roxas will erupt into a festering pustule of disease and infection."

"Oh. Right," Xaldin shuddered, his half-bishonen locks sparkling and fluttering in the apparent indoor breeze behind him. He fingered one of them—they were nearly covering three quarters of his head by this point and he could feel his right sideburn shivering in anticipated fear. "I'd imagine I'm not far off from that estimate, myself."

"But don't worry, pookies! I don't intend for you to even wait that long!" the Fangirl oozed, smiling wickedly. The terrible tween held up the Tupperware before them and reached for the edge of the lid. "Let's just say... there are some old friends who are *dying* to meet you!"

For perhaps the first time in their long and twisted journey, for perhaps the first time in all the freakish and unsettling things they had seen in all the worlds in all of Fandom Hearts—the three Nobodies were heard to utter a unison swear word so inappropriate that it would jack the rating of the very text you read up another point and make it illegal to sell to minors if it were ever to be made into a video game. Of course this is the internet and the author bets over half of you are in this forbidden age group, so for the sake of continued readership she will leave this swear word to your imaginations.

"She's going to resurrect the Semes!" Lexaeus growled under his breath.

"You can't do that!" Xaldin cried.

"Why not?" the Fangirl asked.

"Because it's **EXTREMELY** detrimental to the success of our mission!" Vexen moaned indignantly.

"Oh, of course. Let's see," the Fangirl drifted off in a moment of thought. "Oh yes—THAT'S THE IDEA! HAHAAHAHA!"

And with that, the Fangirl cracked the lid off of the Tupperware and let it go. It floated mystically in the air, the six you knows within fluttering gently back and forth within the translucent walls, as though too shy to emerge from their plastic sanctuary.

You could almost say they didn't have the—

"But we **won't**," Xaldin interrupted the narrative sharply.

The three Nobodies watched in half-horror and half-awe as the Fangirl pulled out her staff and begin to dance a nearly exact replica of Yuna's Sending dance from Final Fantasy X, complete with Hymn of the Fayth music blasted out of the stereo by the ever-helpful Murray the night janitor. The forced mingling between one of the most beautiful, moving, AMV-frequenting cutscenes in the game and a delusional superpowered fangirl summoning awful fandom stereotypes with the symbolic manhoods of a group of fictional bad guys was enough to make Square-Enix fans across the internet cry tears of blood.

"Well, I'll never be able to play that game again," Lexaeus lamented, because he needed to complain about the situation at large in small, manageable chunks.

"And there's a fan fiction about it being written right... now," Vexen sighed.

On the far opposite side of Fandom Hearts, across the universe and through two and a half interdimensional barriers, Auron, Vivi and Irvine were banding together and setting off on a journey to destroy the parasitic plague spawned by this unfortunate similarity—but this is the Kingdom Hearts version of Those Lacking Spines, so we're going to ignore that.

In any case, the Tupperware began to glow with an unearthly light and the six you knows within began to emerge. They grew larger and larger, the firefly lights expanding into a purple mist in which there began to form faces—terrible, distorted and yet gut-wrenchingly familiar faces. Voices began to call out from the mist and odd limbs began to reach out from the glow, fighting their way out of the fray. The mist divided into six clumps—shadows stretched across the floor, the voices became clearer, and they began to laugh.

And in an unholy flash of light, six horribly familiar voices rang out in a maniacal chorus of laughter, joined shortly by the cackling Grand Master Fangirl.

The Semes of Ogy IX—minus Aku-chan, who was safely back in Axel's nightmares where he belonged. And minus Mansex, whose you knows were still locked safe within the orb of the Fangirl's staff. And minus Roxas's eventual Seme, who was due to be born in about eight minutes—had returned.

And they'd upgraded to Version 2.0. Semes With a Vengeance. Revenge of the Semes. Semes 2: The Secret of the Ooze.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus clenched their teeth together and grouped a little closer, knuckles tightening around their respective weapons as they surveyed how badly they were now outnumbered. Not only had all the rest of the Semes returned in full force, but they'd received Extreme Clone Makeovers—their outfits were shinier, their figures were sleeker and their hair was so gorgeous it'd make even a modern Castlevania character designer say, "Wow, maybe they're a little *too* girly."

"Well, well, WELL!" whispered the ever-slimy voice of Marly-dono, tossing six feet of pink hair over his shoulder. He was now dressed in a disturbing real-world approximation of the Great Fairy's ensemble from Ocarina of Time. "If it isn't the little upstarts who RUINED our beautiful plans!"

"Not yet, dude!" Xiggy-kun grinned and ran a hand over his shirtless, well-oiled surfer god body, tanned to a perfect golden brown. A tangerine Speedo completed the look. "Looks like we're totally gettin' another chance!"

"YEEEEAAAAAYUH!" screamed Luxory, flaunting his new floor-length white mink fur coat and running fingers through his Backstreet Boys goatee. His wish had finally been granted and he'd come back to life with a diamond bling so heavy it almost weighed him down.

Secks had returned in a gold-embroidered velvet jacket over an open-chested white shirt and a red satin cape. His blue-lilac hair fell to his knees and his brand new kawaii-dono puppy-chan ears flattened against his head as he snarled in fury. "What a sssssssssincere pleasure it will be," he hissed, "To desssssstroy you thisssssss time!"

Zexy-poo, meanwhile, looked even more like Gerard Way than he had before, and upon realizing it was having trouble keeping the smile off his face in favor of his usual scowl. He settled for moodily pulling his bangs into his face and acting disinterested.

But perhaps the most impressive makeover of all belonged to dear Demykins. He had been reincarnated with a brand new rhinestone-encrusted Elvis suit, a full-out Princess Tutu outfit over the top of it and a wild mane of rainbow-streaked blond hair that would make Lady Lovely Locks sick with envy. The overall effect was something like a vamped up *Labyrinth*-era David Bowie. "Man, I feel like a woman!" he announced, just in case anyone was wondering.

As Japan immediately set to making the action figures (available for thirty dollars at the nearest comic book shop, guaranteed to break within ten seconds of you taking it out of the box), the Semes parted as their queen stepped forward, still brandishing her staff.

"As you can see, your little journey is at an end!" she recited from the quotations section of her villain handbook. "You are outnumbered. You are overpowered. You are on a very short time limit. And if you do not surrender to me immediately," the Fangirl smiled and struck a pose. "I will have my beautiful Semes rip you limb from limb!"

"HAH!" the Semes yelled in unison, striking karate poses. Then with an epic scream, the Final Battle began.

And it began so quickly that our unfortunate three heroes were unable to do any planning, any plotting or discussing strategies before hand. All of a sudden they were fighting for their lives (or un-lives... you know the spiel) against a sextet of supremely sinister Semes with serious axes to grind.

Or axes to deflect, in Lexaeus's case, as Demykins and Zexy-poo immediately set upon him with intent to maim. At least Zexy-poo had intent to maim, that is, as Demykins was attempting to use his mastery of the ancient martial arts known as "Spasmodic Tiger, Hidden Gerbil". It mostly involved kicking the muscular Nobody in the shins and trying to headbutt him when his back was turned and his attention was distracted dealing with Zexy-poo on the other side.

Given the author's exceptional procrastination, a minor correction is needed here—in the several (to be gentle) months span between the publication of the previous chapter and the current, it was revealed that Zexion's mysterious unknown weapon was, in fact, a book. In order to coincide with this fact, Zexy-poo will now be wielding the appropriate weapon, tweaked a bit for comedic purposes.

He chased Lexaeus around in dizzy circles, attempting to bean him upside the head with an iron-plated volume of Johnny the Homicidal Maniac.

As Lexaeus lunged and dodged and made a mighty effort to chase off his enemies with powerful swings of his tomahawk, he was very annoyed to find out that they were much faster in these incarnations. "Hold still!" he grunted as Zexy-poo darted out of the way time and again, swifter than the shadows he loved so very, very much.

"WHEEEEE!" Demykins bounced harmlessly off of Lexaeus's shoulder and hit the ground as Zexy-poo guarded against a tomahawk swing—nearly sending the massive weapon flying out of Lexaeus's hand.

"You haven't the slightest idea how excited I am to kill you," Zexy-poo whispered in his best dramatic poetry-reading voice.

"Oh yes?" Lexaeus queried.

"Yessss," Zexy-poo hissed, shivering with excitement as they circled each other. "How I have longed to taste the sweet nectar of battle-drawn blood since I was small..."

"WHAPOOWWW!" Demykins made a flying leap at Lexaeus and completely missed. His valiant attack was utterly ignored.

"I hate to tell you this, Seme, but you were never small," Lexaeus reminded Zexy-poo. "You are the kidnapped reproductive—"

"NO! SHUT UP!" Zexy-poo howled. "You don't know! You don't understand! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE! When you feel all alone... and the world has turned its back on you..."

"Isn't that another Savage Garden song?" Lexaeus asked drolly.

"NYEEAERGH!" Demykins threw a convenient nearby laundry basket full of Hannah Montana T-shirts and bellbottom GAP jeans at Lexaeus as hard as he could. It landed harmlessly six yards to the left of the fight.

The battle raged on.

Across the room, it was all Xaldin could do to hold off the relentless barrage of magical gunfire and the swings of a very effeminate but very deadly scythe, all six of his lances storming around him like two by fours in a hurricane.

"I've been meaning to tell you, sweetie, I LOVE what you've done with your hair!"

Marly-dono giggled obscenely and struck a little flirtatious pose.

"Like, totally, dude," Xiggy-kun agreed, and paused from the battle to brush his luxurious hair back over his perfectly bronzed shoulder. "It's totally you! One thing's like, soooo certain..."

"You'll be SUCH a beautiful Seme!" Marly-dono finished his thought, practically purring.

"Shut up!" Xaldin growled, and threw everything he had into thrusting his lances in a desperate attempt to impale his opponents. "I'll NEVER join you! I'd rather DIE!"

"Dude—we HATE nay-sayers in this gang," Xiggy-kun cackled. "Maybe he totally ain't such a good candidate after all, Marly?"

"Not a good candidate for a Seme?" Marly-dono gasped. "Xiggy, darling, are you even READING the prose?"

Marly-dono and Xiggy-kun cackled with mirth, strutting around him in circles like models on a catwalk. They were blocking Xaldin's every attack easily—even as Xiggy-kun, in all logic, could not effectively block a six-foot spear with a small hand-held magic gun thingy.

Xaldin winced and took a moment to rest, crossing his lances in defense. He was already exhausted—his hair was growing more beautiful by the moment, his remaining sideburn was practically screaming in pain. He looked out of the corner of his eye at a massive clock that was counting down from six minutes, now, set up by the Fangirl in order to make the fight a little more dramatic.

Time was running out. Had he a heart, it would have been pounding. Had he circulating blood, he would have felt something within it... something stirring, something awakening within his very being, something calling out to him, *Xaldy... Xaaaaldy. Xaaaaldy. Let us go out and play, Xaldy...*

The battle raged on.

Across the room, Vexen was not faring much better against Secks and Luxory. The mere sight of them had got him boiling with echoes of what would have once been fury and loathing, and let's face it, a shield is only so effective a weapon against an overgrown kawaii puppy-chan werewolf guy and a blingety pimp-wannabe with a diamond-studded cane and platform shoes that hurt like a bitch when they kick you.

"How I've loooooonged to ssssssssssssee you again, Number Four," Secks snarled, licking his chops hungrily.

"YEEEEEEEEAAAYUH!" Luxory interjected.

"You'll pay for what you've done to me!" Vexen snapped, raising a barrier of sharp icicles around him to ward them away for the moment. "You've turned me into an inside joke!"

"Vexsssssssssen, you were ALWAYSSSSSS a joke!" Secks laughed cruelly. "We only helped exaasssssssssssssssssssssssssssscerbate it!"

"HUUUWHAT?" Luxory asked.

"Exaasssssssssscerbate, you ssssssstupid fool!" Secks barked, literally. "Exasssssssssscerbate! It meansssssssssss 'to worsssssssssssen or intensssssssssify a ssssssssssssituation!'"

"HUUUWHAT?" Luxory repeated.

"Did ssssssssssssomeone break your sssssssssssspeech button or ssssssssssssomething?" Secks rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Issssssssss that all you can ssssssssssssay now?"

"Actually, it seems in this incarnation I've come equipped with an upgraded speech capacity and the ability to express myself in a somewhat more sophisticated manner," Luxory replied, "Though at this juncture in time, I assumed that the revelation of this fact was unnecessary and irrelevant to the events at hand. I apologize for keeping this information from you, considering that you are my partner and thereby have a right to know something of this magnitude. In the future I will share these circumstances the moment they come to my attention. I beg your pardon."

Vexen and Secks stared at Luxory in disbelief.

"Sssssssssssso don't just ssssssssstand there! Ssssssssslay him!" Secks ordered.

"HOOOKAY!" said Luxory.

The battle raged on.

And watching over it all, at the front of the room on her gilded throne, the Grand Master Fangirl watched it all and smiled.

"Yes, my minions," she called, in the throes of a particularly evil swell of pride, "Strike them down. Rend them asunder, my little puppets, so that they may join you in my carnival of pleasures..."

Indeed, things were looking extremely grim for our three heroes at the moment. Xaldin had fallen to his knees and struggled to hold his lances in place, a stalemate blocking Xiggy-kun and Marly-dono from getting any closer. Vexen was holding Secks and Luxory away from him with two well-placed walls of ice, but his powers were weakening and he couldn't hold it for much longer...

And in the most unfortunate turn of events yet, Lexaeus was thrown off balance by a deflected tomahawk strike and had miraculously tripped over an unfortunately placed Demykins. He stumbled, crashing to the ground and sprawling out on his back. As Zexy-poo struggled to get a proper grip back on his weapon, Demykins stood up and over the mighty Nobody wielding a deadly weapon—a razor-edged ukulele he'd found hidden in his Hammerspace pocket while he was looking for Bubble Yum.

"Ooooooooooooooh! Look what I got!" Demykins said proudly, and the razor's sharp edge gleamed in the harsh light of the chamber like a death sentence.

Well, not that death sentences are shiny, but... oh, you know what the narrator's getting at.

"Lexaeus!" Vexen and Xaldin cried out in unison—he was in trouble, they had to break away, but they could not, one move and they'd be obliterated...

Lexaeus stared up in horror at the unstable Seme and his weapon. Demykins' line of sight drifted down from the Nobody's eyes to his... uh... pants-area. A mildly evil grin spread across his face.

"YES!" the Fangirl leapt out of her throne. "DO IT! Do it! Kill him! Make him a Seme! DO IT, DEMYKINS!"

Tense violin music throbbed in the background. Lexaeus's eyes widened. His companions' screams died premature in their throats. The other Semes stopped their attacks and turned to watch the carnage. The Fangirl cheered. Demykins smiled wider.

"No!" the Nobodies shouted.

"YES!" the Semes and the Fangirl whispered.

"REE! REE! REE! REE!" went the violin.

"MURRAY! You're ruining it!" the Fangirl screamed.

"Oh," Murray the night janitor and musical connoisseur lowered the violin from his chin. "But ma'am, I haven't been able to practice—"

"LEAVE ALREADY!" the Fangirl snapped.

Murray pouted and trudged out of the room and the action politely paused as he did. The moment the door slammed behind the unfortunate night janitor, things picked up right where they left off.

"No!" the Nobodies shouted again.

"YES!" the Semes and the Fangirl whispered.

"Four minutes until completion of the Parasite," a computerized voice helpfully said in the background.

Demykins lowered the ukulele. Lexaeus winced and braced himself.

For a brief moment there was a terrible, climactic silence. Then as suddenly as it had been born, it was shattered.

"I'm bored," said Demykins, and he chucked the ukulele over his shoulder.
"When's lunch?"

For a moment no one could speak. They were all too busy staring at the hapless Seme as he lifted up his shirt, prodded his left nipple and went, "HONK!"

"Demykins!" the Fangirl screeched, "You stupid *fool*! You *had* him! Recover your weapon and kill him, THIS INSTANT!"

"Nooooo!" Demykins whined. "I'm boooored! I want a cookie!"

"No cookies until you murder Mistress's enemies!" the Fangirl snapped.

Demykins pursed his lips in a cute little pout and his eyes watered. "B-but..."

"No 'buts!' KILL HIM!"

"Aaawwwwwwwuuuuuuh," Demykins moaned and stared at the floor in shame. He blubbered for a second or two and then began to awkwardly cry.

"Excuse me? Mistress?" Marly-dono said suddenly, placing a hand on his hip and cocking it out to the side. "That was a little rude, mmkay?"

"Yeah, dude, you totally didn't need to go off on him like that! He's just a little stupid dude," Xiggy-kun protested.

"LEAVE DEMYKINS ALOOOONE! LEAVE HIM ALOOOONE!" Zexy-poo sobbed wildly, smearing his mascara.

"SHUT UP! I can go off on him if I want!" the Fangirl howled. "I'm in charge here! I'M the boss! I can do whatever I want—YOUR jobs are just to be my stupid, mindless little puppets and do whatever I say when I say it!"

Were the Fangirl a more tactful and sensitive evil overlady, she might have phrased her reasonings on the matter in a little more respectful a way, so as to avoid insulting her elite fighters in a manner that might cause them to react the way they did. If she had done so, perhaps the saga of Those Lacking Spines may not have ended the way it would eventually end.

But she wasn't, she didn't, she didn't, they did, she didn't and it did. And, well, here we go.

"Eeeeexssssssscusssssssssssse me?" Secks snapped. "'Ssssssstupid'? 'Mindlessssssss'? 'Puppiesssssssss'? Who, exssactly, do you think you are sssssssssspeaking to, Missssssssstressssssss? I, for one, am neither ssssssssssstupid, nor mindlessssssssssss! I am a ssssssssinisssster geniusssssss!"

"Me too!" Zexy-poo sobbed. "I'm not a puppet! I'm an INDIVIDUAL! I'm a REBEL! I'm UNIQUE! You laugh at me because I'm different, but I laugh at you because you're all the same!"

"YEEEEEEEEEEAYUH!" Luxory agreed.

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus eyed each other from across the room. Their eyes

suddenly glinted with a mutual brilliant plan of action.

"Don't you take that tone with me, you punks!" the Fangirl huffed to her Semes. "Maybe you didn't notice this before, but you're all *characters*. In *my* grand masterpiece of a story! **I** am the author of Fandom Hearts! That means that **I** call the shots around here—and you're all nothing but worthless little ideas that I play with however I want!"

"Oh, NO YOU DI-IN'T!" Marly-dono Z-snapped and stomped out front. "Biotch, I KNOW you didn't just go there! You may have created us, but you are NOT the boss of us!"

"I am too!" the Fangirl replied. "You all exist ONLY to perform my bidding! I brought you into this alternate universe, and I can take you right out!"

"Like, totally not cool, dude!" Xiggy-kun protested. "We ain't yours!"

"To be perfectly technical, we are merely characters based on the intellectual property of Tetsuya Nomura, in affiliation with the Square-Enix software conglomerate and with the cooperation of the Walt Disney Corporation," Luxory pointed out. "HOOOKAY?"

"THAT'S WHAT *SHE* SAID!" Demykins said angrily.

And with that, the six Semes and their mistress broke into a raucous argument of Fandom Wank proportions, regarding the ethicality of fan fictions and fan works in general, what responsibility, if any, the author and/or the creator and copyright holder have to enforce the proper ownership of the intellectual works in the example, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

In the meantime, our three heroes regrouped in the center of the room, took a break for a glass of juice and cheese sandwiches, then stepped into the center of the argument and cleared their throats.

"Excuse me?" Xaldin raised his hand. "May I say something?"

"Dependssssssssss," Secks rolled his eyes, "Issssssss it going to be a nine-paragraph preachy sssssssssssspiel about the Big Moral Issuessssssssssss pressssssssssssented in the fan fiction of which we are all a part of?"

"Yes," Vexen answered.

"THEN NO!" the arguers shot back.

"But, with all due respect, you do raise some interesting issues," Lexaeus went on regardless. "The Grand Master Fangirl, evil and tyrannical as she is, is only writing in Fandom Hearts in pursuit of her hobby—she enjoys the series Kingdom Hearts and wishes to express her enjoyment of it in a written form to be shared with others who may also enjoy it. She's only doing it for fun."

"And yet," Xaldin continued, "By publishing her work on the internet—a very, very public domain—she exposes it to the judgment and critiques of others. It is unreasonable of her to assume that readers, who will themselves probably have a very deep and personal connection with the game in question, will keep their opinions on it to themselves, particularly if there is disagreement between their two interpretations of it."

"There is a question of whether or not fan works ought to be subject to the same rules of grammar, punctuation and proper storytelling that we judge all other literary works upon, especially if the fan work was only meant to be in fun and if the author has no intentions of pursuing a literary career," Vexen added.

The Semes and the Fangirl watched the Nobodies in awe as they went off on the preachiest preach they ever did preach, the most moral moral in the story, the Big Point. Meanwhile, on the other side of their computer screens, the readers scrolled past all this junk to get to the funny parts again, and contemplated getting up to go to the bathroom and fetch a glass of water.

"But in general," Lexaeus said, "There needs to be an understanding between author and readers—the internet is a free place. By publishing works of fan fiction on it, the author is expressing his or her opinions and viewpoints on the subject. The readers need to respect that the author may not wish to push him or herself to the heights of literature in writing a simple fanfic—it could just be for fun."

"But on the other hand," Xaldin strolled in a little circle, pontificating his thoughts with an extended finger, "The author must also respect that the readers may not ALWAYS like what he or she writes. By publishing on the internet, the author must be prepared to accept whatever criticism may come—it is the reader's right to speak freely their opinions, just as much as it is the author's right to publish freely. A true author must learn not to take criticism personally, but to use it as a tool to help improve his or her writing."

Murray the night janitor was pumping some gentle, calming piano music into the room again, and this time there was nothing anyone could do to stop him. That'll

show THEM, he thought, and went back to mopping the floors feeling that this part of his job was done.

"On that note," Vexen said with a hint of disdain, "We have been all through Fandom Hearts and we've seen some pretty terrible things. We've seen some of the most terrible examples of the most trite and terrible clichés imaginable. But you must understand—we are not *condemning* the things we've seen. There's nothing wrong with writing alternate universe fiction..." He motioned at Xiggy-kun.

"Or introducing an original character," Lexaeus gestured to Marly-dono.

Xaldin nodded and pointed at Secks and Luxory, "Or creating a crossover with another favorite fandom."

"Or even writing angst, crackfic comedy or yaoi," Vexen finished. "What we're trying to say is... there are *good* ways to do it and *bad* ways to do it. And if you're going to take the time to do something, isn't it best just to try and do it well?"

"Live and let live," Lexaeus offered, "But do your best to make Fandom Hearts a better place to be—a place for people all over the world to gather, connected by one very important thing..."

"Th-their hearts?" Zexy-poo whispered, his make-up now a complete smeary wreck.

"Uh... no," Lexaeus murmured. "Modems."

There was a long moment of appreciative silence as the piano music faded away. The Semes were nodding in agreement. Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus were catching their breaths from the world's most epic on-the-fly silver tongued bullshit session. The author was copying and pasting the lecture into a new document to turn it in for her paper "Fandom: Fangirlism or Plagiarism?" due next week in her ethics in literature class.

The Grand Master Fangirl looked down upon her subjects and enemies for a good long moment. She stood up, crossed her arms, and spoke.

"No!" she said. "Shut up! I can write whatever I want!" She stomped her feet, threw out her arms, and suddenly the very room darkened around her. "I AM THE AUTHOR! AND YOU OBEY MEEEEEE!"

Thunder rolled and lightning struck outside, sending ominous flashes in through

the windows of The Darkest Tower. Murray's piano music started up again, but this time in a foreboding organ melody reminiscent of track 23 on The Brooding Overlord: Evil-Sounding Songs for Pipe Organ—Greatest Hits, Volume 1! The lights overhead went out and a storm began to brew within the chamber itself, swirling into existence around the furious Fangirl.

Our three heroes and the traumatized Semes watched in horror as the Fangirl began to transform. She grew taller, stronger, sparklier, spikier, bigger and poofier anime hair—her voice dropped into a terrifying baritone and gained a sinister echo.

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, COMING HERE AND TELLING ME WHAT TO DO!" the Fangirl roared. **"WHAT DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? I... I AM THE AUTHOR! I AM ALL-POWERFUL HERE! THIS WORLD, THIS UNIVERSE, THEY ARE ALL MY CREATIONS! YOU ARE NOTHING BUT WORDS ON A PAGE TO ME! I CAN TWIST YOU, BEND, YOU, MAKE YOU DO WHATEVER I LIKE—AND THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO TO STOP ME!"**

"Try us!" Xaldin yelled, and drew all six of his lances.

"We've said it before, and we will say it over and over again," Vexen pulled out his shield and held it before him.

"We'll NEVER obey you!" Lexaeus boomed, and wielded his tomahawk.

"I'VE HEARD IT BEFORE, AND I STILL DON'T BELIEVE IT!" the Fangirl cackled. **"NOW ENOUGH OF THIS FOOLISHNESS! YOU! WILL! DIE!"**

Winds roared around the Fangirl and nearly blew them off their feet, but they stood strong. In the back of the room, the Semes were huddled in a terrified heap, murmuring and whispering to each other in fear.

"What are you doing back there?" Vexen cried to them.

"Um... huddling?" Marly-dono offered.

"Yeah, dude, we're pretty freaked out, what with her threatenin' to kill us for disobeyin' an' all," Xiggy-kun reminded him.

"And are you gonna take that!" Lexaeus snapped. "After all this, are you still going to let her push you around?"

"YEEEEAAAAYUH?" guessed Luxory.

"Gentlemen!" Xaldin called back, "We have said before that you are nothing but the dredged remains of masculinity—but we were wrong!"

"You were?" Zexy-poo murmured.

Vexen blinked. "We were?"

"Yes!" Xaldin said impatiently. "Because you're not just ANY dredged remains of masculinity—do you know WHOSE dredged remains of masculinity you are?"

Secks suddenly snarled and leapt to his feet. He stood proudly for a moment, then hunched down in a pose to prepare for battle. "Organisssssssssssation XIII!"

"That's right!" Xaldin rallied. "And that means you NEVER back down!"

He neglected to mention a full third of Demyx's attempts at espionage and Zexion's aforementioned attempts at cooking oysters for purposes of morale-boosting.

"Stand with us, you... weird somewhat disturbing pieces of our comrades!" Lexaeus cried. "Stand with us, and we'll defeat her together!"

"YEEEEEEAAAYUH!" Luxory whipped his pimp cane about and stood up. Marly-dono and Xiggy-kun followed, tossing their hair back and cracking their knuckles to loosen up. Demykins, grinning like a moron, skipped up beside his comrades in arms. Even little Zexy-poo, suffering an extreme battle of morals as he angsted internally over the situation at large, rose to his feet and stood to fight.

"In the name of all that is intelligent," Xaldin said.

"In the name of all that is geeky," Lexaeus added.

"IN THE NAAAAAAME OF LOVE! ONE NIGHT IN THE NAME OF LOVE!" Axel screeched somewhat melodiously.

"You craaaazy fool! I won't give into you!" Larxene continued.

The Ukes catcalled and cheered wildly. Luxord's script for a live adaptation of Moulin Rouge was turning out *spectacularly*.

"In the name of all that is sarcastically amusing," Vexen cried, "Fight, Fangirl!"

Nine Organization members, whole and lacking spines, shouted in unison. "WE WILL DEFEAT YOU!"

It was very Sailor Moon.

The Fangirl roared in fury and an evil glow began to develop around her. The energy of her growing attack filled the room and nearly knocked the Organization off their feet, but they stood strong and banded together, beginning to march across the chamber towards her. The glow began to develop an eerily familiar bluish-silver glow—the Yaoi Cannon! Just a little more charging and she would release it, ending this all in one fell swoop...

Murray's piano music had become one of the more dramatic tracks from The Lion King. It somehow felt very appropriate.

Thorny vines of darkness began to form around the Organization, creating a protective barrier. Their powers had banded together. A few random Dusks popped up from the shadows, marching out front to join in battle with their masters. They would fight or die trying to overthrow this insane preteen.

And as the Fangirl opened her arms to unleash the Yaoi Cannon, as the Organization began their final charge, it was all very suddenly interrupted by a voice from nowhere.

JENNIFER! JENNIFERRR! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Quite suddenly, everything stopped. The music disappeared. The lights turned back on. The glow around the Grand Master Fangirl disappeared and she shrank back to normal size. The Dusks vanished and the Nobodies and Semes united paused—

JENNIFER! ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

The Grand Master Fangirl's expression melted into severe annoyance. She groaned, stared up at the ceiling and shouted, "What, Mom, WHAT? I'm in my room on the computer!"

YOUNG LADY, IF I'VE TOLD YOU ONCE I'VE TOLD YOU A THOUSAND TIMES...

"I DID my homework already!" the Grand Master Fangirl, nee Jennifer screamed back. "I TOLD you I was done!"

WHAT IS THE RULE REGARDING COMPUTER USE IN THIS HOUSE? YOU HAVE TO BE DONE WITH HOMEWORK AND CHORES BEFORE YOU GET COMPUTER TIME!

"B-but MOM!" the Grand Master Fangirl complained. "Th... That's not fair! Becca has to go to a recital for her brother tonight! I'm not gonna be able to talk to her! This is my only chance—"

NO BUTS, YOUNG LADY! YOU KNOW THE RULES! NOW SHUT DOWN THAT COMPUTER AND COME DO THE DISHES.

"I HATE dishes!" she moaned.

WHAT A SAD LIFE YOU HAVE. GET DOWN HERE AND DO THE DISHES!

"MOOOM!" the Grand Master Fangirl cried, "Can't this wait? Please? I'm in the middle of something!"

NO! IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY OUTSIDE, YOU SHOULDN'T BE ON THE COMPUTER ANYWAY! WHY DON'T YOU GO OUT AND RIDE BIKES FOR A WHILE?

"What am I, eight?"

NO. YOU'RE TWELVE.

It was rather amusing to watch the way the Fangirl's face turned stark white as her former subjects and the Nobodies stared at her in amusement.

"I'm fourteen," she said quickly. "I'm fourteen! I'M FOURTEEN!"

"You're twelve," the corner of Vexen's lips rose wickedly. "You're only twelve years old."

"I'M FOURTEEN!" the Fangirl screamed. "And so what if I am twelve! But I'm NOT!"

"If you are twelve years old," Xaldin elaborated, "You're too young to be using the majority of internet sites, as stated in their Terms of Service."

She shook her head desperately. "That's not true!"

"It is true," Lexaeus shrugged. "So sorry."

The Fangirl looked suddenly disheveled, bedraggled, flustered and stressed. She panted heavily, almost hyperventilating. She clutched at her staff and staggered back and forth across her royal platform.

"I'm the queen," she murmured. "I'm the Queen of Fandom Hearts! You can't get rid of me! I created you! All of you! I'M THE QUEEN!"

JENNIFER! GET DOWN HERE THIS INSTANT!

Jennifer made a face of utter frustration. Her features twisted, she twitched, her lips pressed together into a thin line and her eyebrows crinkled. Then, she burst out into sobs, shrieking at the top of her lungs.

"I HATE YOU, MOM! YOU'RE THE WORST MOTHER IN THE WORLD! YOU'RE SO UNFAIR! IT'S NOT FAAAAIR!" she screamed.

And with that, the Grand Master Fangirl disappeared with an electronic beeping noise and a fizzle of smoke.

The silence lasted a few seconds, and was then broken by a snicker.

"Sorry, Jennifer," Vexen sneered, "It looks like you've just been TOS'ed."

The three Nobodies chuckled to themselves.

"We're free," muttered Marly-dono from where the Semes had gathered. "Do you guys realize what this means? We're... FREE! AAWMIGAWD!"

"I feel our first actions as free Semes ought to be to unionize to prevent this ever happening again," Luxory offered. "HOOOOKAY?"

"Huddle!" Xiggy-kun shouted, and the Semes all huddled together to discuss something.

"I thought that was it there, for a moment," Lexaeus pursed his lips.

"Indeed. But that was some quick thinking on our parts, if I do say so myself," Xaldin grinned. "I especially liked your bit about yaoi, Vexen. Do you really believe that?"

"Heavens no," Vexen snorted, "But, alas, I suppose it was a good point. It's only my opinion anyway. To each his own."

"Whatever opens your portal of darkness," Lexaeus offered.

"Well said, Lexaeus."

"Thank you."

"Excussssssssssse me," Secks interrupted them, clearing his throat. The Nobodies turned to find all six of the Semes looking at them with very businesslike expressions. "Asssssssss represssssssentative of the Union of Sssssssssssemessssss, we have a bussssssssinesssss propossssssssiton for you all."

"Indeed?" Lexaeus asked.

"YEEEAYUH," Luxory nodded.

"We, um..." Marly-dono murmured shyly, "We've, um, considered our options. As far as the whole killing you and making us join us thing goes."

"And dudes, we've agreed on accounta majority vote," Xiggy-kun cut in. "We totally wanna go back."

"You do?" Xaldin looked surprised. "You mean, back to where you belong? Without a fight?"

"Yeah," Zexy-poo said glumly. "We wanna go home."

"It's boring here anyways," Demykins admitted with a shrug. "I mean, there's no crayons. And she took all the scissors away because of what I did to the cat..."

"Ah, splendid news!" Vexen gushed. "I was hoping we wouldn't have to fight the lot of you again."

"We'd be happy to oblige, in other words," Xaldin informed the Semes.

"Oh. Okay. Goody," Secks looked pleased.

Lexaeus marched up to the Fangirl's throne and recovered her dropped staff, inside the crystal of which Xemnas's you knows were floating, having missed out on the whole dramatic final battle bit. He also snatched the abandoned Tupperware

back from where it had tumbled. There were even still a few goldfish crackers inside.

"Here we are," he said. "Now, ah, if you all wouldn't mind riding in this again?"

"Oh no, not at all, honey!" Marly-dono giggled flamboyantly. "It's actually quite comfy!"

"D-do... do we have to do it the way we did before?" Zexy-poo squeaked. As the other Semes considered his statement, their hands began to drift down to stand guard over a particular weak spots of theirs.

"No, no," Vexen said, "I believe if you just... let yourselves go, you will make your way back to your frilly purple state without too much of a problem."

"This is almost too easy," Xaldin murmured amusedly.

"Indeed! Though," Lexaeus mumbled, "I do feel like we're forgetting something."

In a way very typical of those somethings, it immediately came roaring back into the Nobodies' attention what they had forgotten and how incredibly vital it was.

"ATTENTION ALL PERSONNEL," spoke a voice over the building's PA system. "THE GUTLESS PARASITE IS AT 99.9999 PERCENT COMPLETION. ESTIMATED TIME UNTIL COMPLETION: ONE MINUTE, THIRTY SECONDS. PLEASE STAND BY FOR EVIL PLAN." Followed by a calming segue of elevator music.

Vexen uttered a particularly vulgar swear word, quite loudly. It made Demykins cry.

"Oh HELL!" Lexaeus shouted, "We forgot about the Parasite!" He spun around back towards the safe corner where he'd deposited Roxas's body—the teenaged Nobody was still sleeping quite peacefully. "Roxas! He's..."

Xaldin realized with sudden alarm what that meant. "Not just him! In one minute, I'll..." He clapped a hand to the side of his face and noticed, for the first time since the beginning of the battle, that his remaining sideburn had gone silent. His braids were almost entirely transformed. The Parasite was spreading! "Mother of darkness!"

"Hey! Hey, you, Semes!" Vexen snapped his fingers to get their attention. "You'll know this! What do we do? How do we stop the Gutless parasite in the next minute and twenty seconds!"

"Stop it? Oh, honey, you can't stop it," Marly-dono said in a hush-hush voice.

"Yeah dude, it's totally, like... gonna eat your face?" Xiggy-kun elaborated.

"NO!" Xaldin yelled. "NO! I will NOT—NOT LOSE MY... YOU KNOW!"

"Oh, it's worssssssssssssssse than that," Secks mentioned off-handedly. "The Yaoi Cannon workssssssssssss differently than our parasssssssssssite. There'll be nothing for your you knowssssssssss to come back to—your body itssssssssssself is becoming a Gutlessssssssssssss. The boy alsssssssssso... ssssssssssuch a shame, really."

Luxory seemed to agree. "YEEEEEEEEAYUH!"

"And not just that," Xiggy-kun pondered, "But like... when Roxas loses his you know, y'know? His Other's gonna get it too, see, cuz... cuz like, that's the new parasite growin' up, right? So then, like... the whole rest of the universe is gonna come down with it too. So... guess our Seme union's gonna get a lot bigger, huh, dudes? Duuuuude..."

"Sucks to be you," Zexy-poo shrugged. "And after you were gonna win your mission, too."

"Hey guys," Demykins whispered.

"This can't be... this can't be happening!" Xaldin was starting to panic again, pacing back and forth with one hand clutched to his poor, threatened sideburn. "There has to be a way!"

"Now, now, Xaldin, not all is lost yet," Lexaeus tried his best to assure him. "There's still hope!"

"Heeeey guuuuys," Demykins repeated.

"Hope? HOW! Even the Semes don't know how to fix it!" Xaldin moaned.

"There HAS to be a way!" Vexen argued. "It's just basic science! For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction—all that has been done can theoretically be

undone! It's just a matter of finding out how!"

"HAAAAY YOU GUUUUYS," Demykins finally screamed at the top of his lungs.

All eyes in the room were on him.

"Ahem. Thanks," Demykins grinned proudly. "What about the beta?"

"The beta?" echoed Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus.

"THE BETA!" Secks and Luxory suddenly cried. (Luxory added a "YEEEEAYUH" as well)

"Oh! The BETA!" Zexy-poo and Marly-dono suddenly remembered.

"Like, DUUUH!" Xiggy-kun rolled his eyes.

"Oh, of courssssssssse! Why didn't we think of that before?" Secks snapped his clawed fingers. "Good thinking, Demykinssssssss!"

"Actually, I meant the fish," Demykins murmured. "I have one in my room here. His name is Hymie. He likes bacon."

"Shut up, you!" Xaldin demanded. "What is a beta?"

"The BETA," Luxory gained back his vocabulary at the perfect time, "Is a machine that the Fangirl used to use back in the day when she was working on creating new worlds. It sweeps over things and eliminated all Gutless. YEEEEEEEEEEAYUH. "

"BAM!" Xiggy-kun clapped his hands. "Like THAT?"

"Like THAT," Secks nodded. "She hasssssn't ussssed it sssssssssssince the Gutlesssssss took over and created all of usssssss... but it should sssssssssssstill be working. It will dessssssssstroy all of the Gutlesssssss on thissssssssss world, once and for all."

"It eliminates bad elements of fan work and it's called a BETA?" Vexen rolled his eyes. "My, isn't THAT heavy-handed?"

"But that's not all, honey! It also gets rid of all the parasites that are dormant, like the ones in you and in your sexy little friend there," Marly-dono pointed from Xaldin to Roxas, in turn.

"But doesn't that include *you*?" Lexaeus asked.

"Indeed, it does," Marly-dono shrugged, "Buuuuuut we'll be safe if you stick us in your little Tupperdoodad, honey."

"Oh, thank the darkness," Vexen moaned. "This was almost a..." then he paused. "Wait. What will happen to Roxas and Xaldin?"

The Semes were all quiet for a moment.

"Um... BAM!" Xiggy-kun finally answered, clapping his hands again. "Like THAT."

"ONE MINUTE UNTIL PARASITE COMPLETION. PREPARE THE CHAMPAGNE."

Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus stared at the Semes in shock. Only Xaldin did not blink.

"So wait," Lexaeus clarified, "When we turn on the BETA it'll destroy all the Gutless, including the parasite, thereby preventing the destruction of the universe. But if we do, it'll kill Roxas and Xaldin?"

"Technically Nobodies aren't really alive..." Vexen began.

"Vexen, please. Is now really the time?"

"It's ALWAYS time for science."

"Um... whatever we decide to do, could we, y'know," Marly-dono was hopping from foot to foot. "Kinda hurry?"

"Give us a moment!" Lexaeus snapped.

Vexen moaned, "We don't *have* a moment, Lexaeus—"

"Do it."

All eyes were on Xaldin. His face was set in a furious glower.

"What did you say, Xaldin?" Lexaeus asked.

"I said do it," Xaldin repeated. "There's no time. There's no other option. I said I'd rather die than become a Seme—I intend to make good on it."

"But Xaldin..." Vexen murmured. "Roxas?"

"Roxas would agree with me. Do you think he would want to live in a place run by the Gutless? If he was awake, he would do what he had to in order to save our universe," Xaldin shrugged. "We haven't the time to debate this, gentlemen. We must do it now. You—Saïx... thing. How do we turn on the BETA?"

"With that big obviousssssssssssssssss red button on the wall over there," Secks gestured to an indeed, very big obvious red button on the wall next to the Fangirl's throne.

"Very good," Xaldin sighed. "I'll get Roxas. Lexaeus, get the you knows into the Tupperware. Vexen, prepare to push the button."

Lexaeus made a solemn expression. "Very well." He cracked open the Tupperware, shook it out a few times, and held it up. "All right, then—everybody in! And, uh, let's not make a huge production of it? We're on a tight schedule."

The Semes stood proud and strong in their final moments of creepified existence, getting one more good look at themselves and the world as it appeared through the eyes of a skewed fannish creation.

"Well, it's been real, and it's been fun, but it hasn't been REAL fun, honey," Marly-dono huffed. "Ciao, darlings!" He faded out of existence and back into a little purple something or other that gently came to rest in the Tupperware in Lexaeus's hand.

"Dude, total show-off," Xiggy-kun vanished next, followed shortly by Demykins, still screaming about Hymie. "I HAVE GINGIVITIS!"

Zexy-poo glared sourly at the three of them before he made his exit, leaving only Secks and Luxory behind.

"Godssssssssssspeed, then, gentlemen," Secks hissed, then crossed his arms. "Er... ssssssssssorry. About the... cake thing, Number Four."

"It's..." Vexen groaned from where he stood, examining the BETA button. "It's all water under the bridge."

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEAYYUH!" Luxory howled. "Er... salutations and farewell, my friends. HOOKAY!"

The two of them popped out of existence and with a sturdy crack, Lexaeus slammed the Fangirl's staff against the floor, shattering the orb and releasing Xemnas's you knows. It quickly rejoined the others and Lexaeus slapped the lid on it, feeling an odd sort of satisfaction in knowing they'd finally caught 'em all.

And yet, also feeling rather irritated at something.

Our three heroes gathered around the BETA button, Xaldin with Roxas in his arms and beautiful girl hair flowing out from every inch of his scalp. Vexen's hand hovered over the button, hesitant, and Lexaeus switched the Tupperware back from hand to hand.

"Well," Vexen finally spoke first. "I may agree with something Marluxia said for the first time ever—it's been real, it's been fun, but it hasn't been real fun."

"Indeed," Lexaeus murmured.

Xaldin snorted a bit and shook his head. "We don't have hearts, gentlemen."

"And yet, if we did," Lexaeus elaborated, "I would probably feel extremely bad about this."

"Yes," Vexen agreed mildly. "Yes, it would be quite upsetting."

"We'll have none of that talk, then, gentlemen," Xaldin scolded them. "If we must then we must. I do not think of it as marching headlong into my terrible death. I think of it as... taking the next great leap. To save the universe."

"And for science?" Vexen asked.

"Yes," Xaldin smirked slightly. "For science."

"Isn't everything we do?" Lexaeus chuckled.

There was an awkward period of a few precious seconds.

"Well, then. Vexen, you may have my books. Take good care of them. I have some original copies in there."

"Thank you, Xaldin, I will."

"And Lexaeus, you can have my troops and all my spare coats. Anything else you

find in the closet you might like."

"That's very kind, Xaldin. Thank you."

"Well then," Xaldin glanced up at the clock. "We have fifteen seconds."

"We will tell Xemnas all about our mission, and perhaps he'll build you a nice shrine," Lexaeus offered. "We'll do a little moment of silence for you."

"Yes. But no singing," Xaldin reminded him.

"Of course not."

"Anyway," Xaldin stood up straight and eyed his comrades. "Gentlemen. The best of luck to you in the future."

Vexen and Lexaeus made grim expressions, and pulled off some very honorable salutes. "Godspeed, Number Three," they said together.

"For science."

"For science!"

And after another second or so of hesitation, Vexen pounded his fist on the button.

There was a loud, sharp whirring noise from the very depths of the Darkest Tower. And then, as though some kind of flash bomb had gone off, the entire tower—the entire world—was covered in an immediate burst of the brightest light imaginable.

Ah, thought Xaldin. So *that's* what getting obliterated felt like.

Nobodies, for the most part, believed there was nothing after death. This probably has to do with the fact that as per their species, there is nothing *before* death either. They had all come close to death at one time or another, and they all figured they'd gotten lucky that time—expecting a second salvation was just denying statistics and probability. The Nobodies expected, upon death, to simply fade away into darkness, the same way they had come into the worlds.

So imagine Xaldin's surprise when his eyes opened again several moments after

his presumed demise.

It hadn't seemed like it took very long—only three seconds or so in between here and there. There was the flash, the great burning sensation and then... nothing. But now he awoke to find himself standing in a great plane, not of darkness, but of light. Pure, white, radiant light.

He blinked a few times in the brightness and glanced down at himself—he was still within his body, or so it seemed. He set a hand atop his head and was relieved to find that his hair had returned to normal, back in its hundreds of braids the way he liked it. Furthermore, his left sideburn had returned to its former splendor, happily basking in the white glow from its rightful place across the left side of his face. The right one seemed happy to have its partner back.

Well, at least there was that. Xaldin supposed that being deceased, it was necessary to find small things to be pleased about. Even if he was dead, at least he looked good. And the bright light he was standing in was rather warm and comfortable. It was not so bad.

And on another bright side, he wasn't alone. Standing next to him with a very blank expression on his face was the now-conscious Roxas. The youngest Nobody still looked a bit sleepy and also exceptionally puzzled—last thing he remembered, he was having a great dream about bikini models opening a car wash across the street from the Castle That Never Was. Then, like he was awakened by some kind of horrible astral alarm clock, he opened his eyes to find himself... um...

"Xaldin?" Roxas murmured. "Uh... can I ask a question?"

"Go ahead," Xaldin replied, "And I'll answer to the best of my ability. But I warn you I'm just about as confused as you are."

Roxas paused for a moment, then asked, "What happened?"

"We're dead," Xaldin said. "At least, I think we are dead."

Roxas, surprisingly, did not look very alarmed by this. He was still struggling to process the fact that the bikini car wash never happened. "Why are we dead?"

"Because," Xaldin said, "To make a long story short, the Organization was attacked by a group of parasites from beyond the dimensions of our universe, transforming most of the members into horrendous creatures, who then kidnapped you. Vexen, Lexaeus and I came to rescue you but unfortunately you and I were

infected with the parasite that would have led to our joining them—in a last-ditch effort to save the universe, we sacrificed ourselves for the greater good and were annihilated by a powerful super weapon."

Never mind that Xaldin had technically made the decision for Roxas, but that all seemed a little pointless to bring up now. That was all water under the bridge, downstream, through the treatment plant, out to sea, rescued by a blue tang and reunited with its father.

"Oh," Roxas blinked a few times, then looked down to examine his hand. "So we're... dead."

"I believe so," Xaldin concluded.

"Oh," Roxas repeated. "Darn."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry we had to die," Xaldin shrugged.

"Me too," Roxas sighed. "Axel TiVOed the season premiere of Heroes and I never got to watch it."

The two began to walk along some kind of mystical road in the middle of all the whiteness, no destination in mind and no idea how long it would take to get there. It's not like they didn't have all the time in the worlds to figure it out. They were an odd pair, the tall and brawny Whirlwind Lancer walking alongside the short, solemn and mid-pubescent Key of Destiny on their way to nowhere in particular.

They walked in silence for what seemed like hours but was actually only about thirty seconds.

"So what happens now?" asked Roxas.

"I honestly couldn't tell you," Xaldin shrugged. "I'd always just heard that after death, a Nobody fades into darkness. And, well... as you can see, that's apparently not true."

"So do we just walk around here forever?" Roxas asked, a tilt of complaint in his voice.

"I suppose we should just see what's here before we..." Xaldin drifted off. "Wait. Do you... hear something?"

The two went silent for a moment and listened very carefully—indeed, off in the distance, notes echoed from within some phantom instrument.

"Yeah, I hear it!" Roxas squinted and listened as hard as he could. "It sounds like music. I wonder where it's comin' from?"

Roxas would apparently not have to wonder much longer, as the sound began to grow louder and louder. Eventually vague notes came together in a strange astral melody that tinkled and echoed across time and space themselves. Suddenly, shadows appeared in the distance as the music continued its crescendo.

Xaldin and Roxas froze in place and watched the shadows growing closer and closer and clearer and clearer. The shadows formed into silhouettes and the music got louder—ethereal, sparkling, almost mystical notes that touched the heart (or lack thereof) and emanated through their very beings, louder and louder, filling them up and giving them at least a very good idea of what it was like to have a soul...

"It's beautiful," Roxas murmured. "What do you think it is?"

"I haven't the slightest clue," Xaldin replied, tilting his head a bit at the approaching silhouettes. "But, seeing as we're dead and all, I'm going to assume that these are the messengers of the great beyond come to answer us all the questions of life, the universe and everything."

"Really?" Roxas blinked. "You seem awfully excited about it."

"Dear boy, in life I was a scientist," Xaldin reminded him. "Answers are my passion. And don't you think it's about time someone explained just what the hell is going on?"

"Maybe we can ask them if there's any way out of here," Roxas offered.

"Precisely my thoughts. I don't intend to walk around here forever."

The music soared as the silhouettes drew even closer, a bright light engulfing them to keep them shrouded in shadow. Roxas and Xaldin drew instinctively closer together, shielding their eyes from the brightness. At last the shadows stood still before them, and the two deceased Nobodies gazed up at them in awe.

"Greetings, oh messengers of the great beyond!" Xaldin called up to them. "Allow me to introduce myself—I am Xaldin, Number Three of Organization XIII. This is

Roxas, Number Thirteen of the same."

"Uh... hi?" Roxas waved.

The ethereal voices of a choir rose up in a beautiful harmony with the music. It seemed that the choir from chapter five had finally found some new work now that Jeffiroth was gone.

"Please, speak to us. Let us share in your wisdom," Xaldin shouted. "We want a way out of here, in one direction or the other—how do we get out?"

The silhouettes did not answer, but the music grew even louder and suddenly the light began to subside. At last it faded completely, leaving Xaldin and Roxas face to face with three stern-looking men in black suits and sunglasses.

The messengers of the great beyond looked an awful lot like—

"Oh no," Xaldin realized quite suddenly.

"What?" Roxas whispered.

Xaldin's face grew pale and he put a hand to his forehead. "Oh no. Oh sweet mother of darkness, no. Say it's not true."

"What's not true?"

The three suited men before them suddenly reached into their coats and pulled out three microphones.

"Xaldin! Why are you shaking?" Roxas asked. "And what are they—" he stopped. "Uh..."

"ARE YOU READY?" shouted the man in the center.

"NO!" Xaldin yelled. "I SAID NO! I WILL NOT BE RESURRECTED BY—"

"GO!"

And with that the three suited men burst into a spectacular song and dance number, completely unfazed by Xaldin's screams of protest.

"I GET KNOCKED DOWN!

But I get up again!

You're never gonna keep me down!

I GET KNOCKED DOWN!

But I get up again!

You're never gonna keep me down!"

Xaldin and Roxas suddenly felt their bodies yanked backwards and away, drawn up in a beautiful white light that engulfed their bodies and dragged them up, and up, and up...

"Pissin' the night away!

Pissin' the night away!

He takes a whiskey drink!

He takes a vodka drink!

He takes a lager drink!

He takes a cider drink!

He sings the songs that remind him of the good times!

He sings the songs that remind him of the best times!

Oh Danny boy!

Danny boy!

Danny boy!"

Roxas closed his eyes and felt his body soaring away, in and out of itself all at once—it was rather reminiscent of an opening sequence he might someday find himself taking part in.

Xaldin, on the other hand, was holding his head as though he was developing a spectacular migraine. "NO SINGING! EVER!"

You couldn't blame the guy. Here he had suffered through world after world of annoyances and agonies unfit for human, much less Nobody life. He'd lost his beloved sideburns to the effects of a supercharged Yaoi Cannon. And to top it all off, he'd undergone a painful and mildly humiliating death, was looking forward to discovering all the secrets of life, the universe and everything—then it turned out that all the matters of such things were handled by the Elite Beat Agents.

Meanwhile, down below, the messengers of the great beyond were really getting into it.

"I GET KNOCKED DOWN!"

But I get up again!

You're never gonna keep me down!

I GET KNOCKED DOWN!"

But I get up again!

You're never gonna keep me down!"

"I'd pray for death, but it's a little too late for that," Xaldin grumbled.

Luckily for Xaldin, he did not have to stay through the rest of the Agents' song, as he and Roxas suddenly found themselves, disturbingly, disappearing with a loud POP--

-- then came another loud POP, followed by the sound of two bodies crashing into tables full of glassware and expensive scientific knick-knacks.

"Oh great!" a familiar voice rang out from behind. "Like *they're* cheap!"

HOKAY. Well. First off.

I'm sorry that took so long. I'm going to throw up the generic "college homework

social life lol" excuse, though I have to admit I've been working on some other projects recently and just MULLING over this baby. At least rest assured I spent many sleepless nights tossing and turning and angsting over how I was going to do it.

If it makes you feel any better, on my personal screen name I haven't updated anything in over a year and a half. :D

But rest assured, that's not all there is to this story, kiddos! There are a thousand questions left to be answered! Are Xaldin and Roxas through with their little astral adventure? Are our heroes in time to save the rest of the Organization—do you know have expiration dates? How are the Elite Beat Agents so uncannily awesome, and where can I go to join them?

Join us next time for the epilogue, the final chapter of Those Lacking Spines!

Ultra special thanks to Lynx, Gext, Dixa, Xelz, Rii and Yamiko for their loving support, as always.

Because We're Not Yet Dead

Epilogue: Because We're Not Yet Dead

As Xaldin lay there, immobile and stunned on the cold floor of who even knew where, shards of glass sticking painfully out of various parts of his backside, he tried to remind himself that days like this had to happen every so often to keep you humble. No matter how powerful and nonexistent you may have thought yourself, there was always some bitch with a keyboard around to subject you to whatever cruel whims destiny may have had in store for you for the amusement of thousands of faceless geeks on the world wide web. Especially when said bitch still had sore memories of being utterly humiliated by the character in question nineteen times in a row when she tried to show off the game play of Kingdom Hearts II to some friends of hers so they could see what a badass true gamer she was. So take that, you sexy, snarky, pseudo-British bastard! HA.

It then occurred to him that he was being crushed into the floor by a smaller someone, someone quite heavy for a waifish fifteen-year-old boy. He realized that he was in a distressing amount of pain for supposedly having shed his mortal coil... whatever happened to the promise of a smooth and painless transition back into the darkness from whence he had come? And hadn't Nomura mentioned something about being reunited with his long lost heart? Somebody was going to be hearing about this... well, Nobody, actually, but the point was—

"Xaldin! Roxas!" Lexaeus's deep voice boomed from somewhere up above them. "Are you all right?"

"That depends on your definition of 'all right'," Xaldin answered back in a strained voice as he opened his eyes. Sure enough, he was flat on his back on the remains of a laboratory table in one of the rear cabins of the GS Existentialist. Roxas was slung out on top of him, eyes open and blinking but looking exceptionally confused. Lexaeus stood over them, towering even as he kneeled with what could be interpreted as concern. Out of the corner of his eyes, Xaldin could see Vexen fuming in the doorway, still in deep mourning for his ruined test tubes and glassware.

"Fair enough," Lexaeus shrugged. "What's your definition?"

"Is my hair still...?"

"No," Lexaeus said with a certain nod. "It's very manly."

"Then I'm all right," Xaldin said hastily.

"Are we..." Roxas murmured hesitantly, "... alive?"

"It would seem so," Xaldin sighed. "Perhaps you would be good enough to get off of me?"

Roxas crawled off and with Lexaeus's help, the two of them stumbled to their feet and tidied themselves up, dusting off their coats and discreetly picking chunks of glass from places best left unmentioned. Aside from the lingering pain of falling out of thin air and slamming into "*extremely expensive and difficult to acquire* laboratory equipment" (as Vexen kept muttering behind them) they felt quite good for the recently resurrected—the proper color, energy returning as normal, healthily lacking a pulse.

"Well, I do believe an explanation is in order," Vexen snapped as he finally worked out his outrage enough to leave the doorway and properly enter the room.

"I was about to ask you the same thing. What do you want from us?" Xaldin muttered, "I haven't the slightest clue what just happened. How did you escape from Los Machosexos?"

Lexaeus shook his head. "It wasn't much trouble. The BETA went off without a hitch—you and Roxas vanished right along with the rest of the Gutless. The city was empty and desolate as a ghost town."

"Self-cleaning Gutless," Vexen snorted.

"Gutless?" Roxas echoed, sounding completely baffled. "Macho-sexo?"

"We made our way back to the gummi ship and set off for home just as planned. But when we fired up the DEM Engines... you suddenly came falling out of thin air," Lexaeus explained.

"I... see," said Xaldin in the tone of voice of one who didn't see at all. He wandered over to one of the chairs mounted along the walls of the shipboard laboratory and had a seat, thoroughly exhausted. "What about the Tupperware? Did anything happen to it?"

"No. Every, uh... you know is perfectly safe and secure," Lexaeus assured him.

"Tupperware? You know?" Roxas repeated. "Um... what's going on?"

Vexen took in a very deep breath. "To make a long story short, the Organization was attacked by a group of parasites from beyond the dimensions of our universe, transforming most of the members into horrendous creatures, who then kidnapped you. Xaldin, Lexaeus and I came to rescue you but unfortunately you and Xaldin were infected with the parasite that would have led to our joining them—in a last-ditch effort to save the universe, you sacrificed yourselves for the greater good and were annihilated by a powerful super weapon until by some idiotic twist of fate you came tumbling out of a wormhole on board our gummi ship right above a table full of my *extremely expensive and difficult to acquire* laboratory equipment."

There was a pause. "Oh," Roxas said quietly, and resigned himself to having absolutely no idea what was going on.

"How do you feel?" asked Lexaeus.

"Capital," Xaldin replied. "Well, as capital as a resurrected shell of a human being can possibly feel, in any case."

"Good," the Silent Hero said with a nod. "It's good to have the two of you back."

"It's good to be back," Xaldin sighed. "Even if the messy details explaining it are sketchy at best."

"About that, Xaldin, Roxas..." Vexen cut in. "I wonder if you might allow me to have a little look at you... in the interest of science, of course. Perhaps I can create a few theories about what just happened, if you don't mind me dissecting the probability of your further non-existence."

"I don't really care," Roxas grumbled, crossing his arms. "As long as my non-existence exists there's no point getting all... existential about it."

"Non-existential," Vexen corrected.

There was a pause.

"Oh, whatever. I'm gonna go take a nap," Roxas moaned, heading towards the ship's bunk. "Call me when we're home."

Once Number Thirteen had made his exit, the three elder Nobodies glanced at one another conspiratorially. "Do you think we should tell him the full details?" asked

Lexaeus.

"We could always tell him he just had cooties," Vexen suggested with a smirk. "Going any further would probably give him a complex."

"Vexen, we're Nobodies," Xaldin reminded him. "'Complex' is our middle name."

"Didn't it used to be LeComp?" Lexaeus asked.

They paused.

"You're really stretching, aren't you?" Vexen directed the question past the fourth wall at the exhausted author. And the answer was yes. Yes, she was.

"I-In any case," the perturbed Lexaeus continued, "I'm sure the answer to our little resurrection conundrum lies in some simple examination of the facts."

"You're honestly expecting anything in this story to make actual sense at this point?" Xaldin snorted. "You can experiment all you want to get your academic grins, but if you're expecting a logical explanation to all this nonsense then I've got a beachfront loft in Agrabah you might be interested in."

"Nonsense indeed, Xaldin!" Vexen said. "I'm sure there must be some scientific explanation for this. If we apply Ansem's third theory of the Heartless—"

"First things first. Science can wait," Xaldin announced, cutting him off mid-sentence. "There's something more important to do first."

"And what's that?" Vexen asked peevishly—as if anything could be more important than science.

Xaldin gritted his teeth into a snide grin. He stood up, clenching one black-gloved fist triumphantly.

"Vodka," he said. "Top-shelf. Straight. On the rocks."

Several hours later, the GS Existentialist drifted lazily back through the interstellar keyhole that separated Fandom Hearts from its canon universe counterpart. This left behind the crazy alternate dimension of nightmares and (blah blah blah blah) behind for good, leaving our heroes with only a short trip

through gummi space and a few paragraphs of weak exposition between them and the rebirth of Organization as we know it.

Xaldin and Lexaeus sat around a tall chalkboard on the shipboard laboratory, watching the third of their number busily scribbling the last bits of a complicated equation. Roxas had retired to the depths of the gummi ship, presumably to use the shipboard computer to post on his Livejournal.

"After very careful observation and experimentation," Vexen announced with a few final chalk strokes on the blackboard, "I have come to the conclusion that there are two possible ways that Roxas and Xaldin were resurrected from certain death, leading to their rather sudden appearance in thin air above my extremely expensive and difficult to acquire laboratory equipment. I will discuss them in order from least likely to most likely, pausing after each to allow for questions."

"Go right ahead, Vexen," Xaldin encouraged, vodka-glass in hand and ready for science. Lexaeus nodded from the chair next to him, a notepad and a pencil sitting on his lap.

"You can all skip this first section if you feel like it," Vexen said with a suspicious glance towards the readers. "Since I doubt any of you are intelligent enough to really follow it anyway. Go get yourself a bowl of Cheetos, or stare at the pretty banner ads for a while. Maybe you'll win a PSP."

With half of the readers now frantically scrolling down the massive blobs of text that took up the next two pages of story, Vexen set into his overcomplicated explanation.

"First off, we will examine theory Number One, which I have entitled the 'Nobody in the Machine Theory'. We must start from the moment at which the BETA device was activated—the moment of Xaldin and Roxas's supposed deaths," Vexen said, circling one portion of the exceptionally long formula he'd scribbled all the way across the board. "When the BETA went off, Xaldin and Roxas's bodies were immediately obliterated into a billion microscopic teeny weeny pieces. Or so we believe. In fact, the moment the BETA went off, for reasons unknown, Xaldin and Roxas's bodies separated instantaneously from the parasites that infected them, and teleported away."

"... what?" Lexaeus murmured.

"Have you ever seen a television cartoon in which a character runs so fast they leave a cloud of smoke behind in the shape of their body?" Vexen asked. "I am

proposing a similar event happened here. Xaldin and Roxas's bodies teleported so fast that the parasite was left straggling behind and was therefore entirely wiped out by the BETA."

"That's..." Xaldin hesitated.

"Yes?" Vexen asked.

"Well, to start with," Xaldin continued sourly. "How in the worlds do you propose we teleported?"

"The DEM Engines," Vexen said proudly. "At the very last second, the DEM Engines were activated by the almighty unseen hand of the author, who did not want the story to end on a sour note by killing off one of the heroes and 'the cuddly little teenage wooby boy, awwww'." At this point, he whipped out his chalk again and began adding random numbers and multiplication signs to the equation on the board. "The DEM Engines teleported Xaldin and Roxas's bodies into themselves, keeping them safe from the BETA's power. When Lexaeus and I returned to the ship and activated said DEM Engines, the resulting force caused Xaldin and Roxas to teleport once again—to the space in the air above my extremely expensive and difficult to acquire laboratory equipment. And the rest..." he concluded his formula with a drawing of a smiley face and a conclusive underline, "is history."

He stood waiting for feedback on his great theory and met only the wide-eyed stares of his two compatriots. "Well?"

"That's..." Xaldin murmured.

"Yes?"

"... Idiotic!" Xaldin snapped.

"I think what Xaldin means to say, Vexen, is that your theory is a little..." Lexaeus paused for tact. "... well, it is pretty stupid."

"Call it what you will," Vexen huffed, "But it is supported by solid, scientific, documented evidence that I gathered upon examining the inner workings of the DEM Engines, the state of Roxas and Xaldin's bodies, and the timeline of events. Even our initial examinations of the Gutless parasite suggest a very sluggish movement compared to normal atoms..."

"That's completely ridiculous!" Xaldin complained. "You expect me to believe that

what Roxas and I experienced was simply a cartoonish bastardization of all physics as we know it, requiring a tremendous suspension of disbelief and perhaps another twelve vodkas' worth of brain function degradation to believe?"

"What's your other theory, Vexen?" asked Lexaeus with a sigh.

Vexen rolled his eyes. "My second theory is called the 'EBA Theory'. It suggests that there is a 'secret government agency' made up of 'agents' who, upon receiving a distress call—"

"The Nobody in the Machine Theory!" Xaldin interrupted frantically. "What a brilliant discovery! What a splash you'll make in the scientific community! Vexen, I believe you're really onto something there!"

"Thank you, Xaldin," Vexen huffed, buffing his fingernails on the collar of his coat.

Lexaeus wisely decided a change of subject was in order. "Well, gentlemen, I'll be excited for things to get back to normal in The World That Never Was, won't you?"

"You have no idea," Xaldin moaned. "I never got to finish that book of blank verse I was reading in chapter one."

"I'll be thrilled to be home," Vexen muttered. "All of this data, all of these samples we've collected from Fandom Hearts..."

"You're going to study them?" asked Lexaeus.

"Heavens no. I'm going to throw them in a file folder and shove it at the very back of my research cabinet where it can rot for the rest of time," Vexen said distastefully. "I won't have this garbage getting in the way of my ordinary experiments."

"I'm looking forward to a tall cup of coffee, personally," Lexaeus chimed in. "Two sugars and lots of milk. Like my soul."

"I am curious, however," Xaldin cut in, "how things went with Axel and Larxene in charge of the others while we were gone."

"I wouldn't be concerned," Vexen said with a slight yawn, wiping the chalk dust off his hands with a small nearby cloth. "Both Axel and Larxene are perfectly responsible, and I place full faith in their leadership abilities. I'm sure they took very good care of affairs while we were away."

"*We're gonna stand our ground!*" came the demanding cry of a Zexion, suspended in midair from the roof of the Theater of Hollow Melodies. He appeared, for all intents and purposes to be dressed as a sitar.

A chorus of manly voices echoed him. "NA NA NA NA!"

"*For freedom... beauty... truth and love!*"

"NA NA NA NA!"

At the front of a lavishly decorated stage, Xemnas cradled Saïx—the former in the simple dress of a penniless sitar player and the latter in a bedazzling floor-length white evening gown with rhinestones and sequin-lined sarong.

"One day I'll flyyyy away!" Saïx had a remarkably good singing voice for a berserker-class.

"My giiiiift is my sooong!" Xemnas wasn't too shabby either.

Though the audience of Dusks looked absolutely thrilled, there was a trio of critics in the aisles that didn't seem to be enjoying the show too much.

"And they did this entirely of their own volition," Xaldin asked the play's director with a dead sort of look on his face.

"Of course," Axel said sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.

Vexen looked, for lack of a better word, vexed. "You didn't plant this idea in their heads at all."

"Nope," Axel repeated.

"They just up and decided to make lavish costumes and put on an amateur production of Moulin Rouge while we were away," Lexaeus queried. "Complete with full stage makeup and beautifully painted backdrops and scenery."

"What can I say? We appreciate the arts here in The World That Never Was." Axel beamed and crossed his arms proudly.

"And of course they asked you to film it," Xaldin posed to the one running the camera.

"We believe that even without hearts, there's always a place for culture in our world," Larxene said innocently, "and that culture should be preserved on DVD or high quality VHS."

"Yours today for the low price of 150 munny," Axel cut in.

"Right," Vexen muttered, rolling his eyes.

"In any case, we've returned from the mission successfully. All you knows are present and accounted for, all members of Organization XIII have been recovered and things should finally start settling down," Lexaeus said in an attempt to change the subject.

"Well isn't that special?" Axel replied. "Whoopadee doo."

"Let's get our comrades back to normal now, if you don't mind, Lexaeus," Xaldin told him.

As he pulled the Tupperware out of his coat sleeves and prepared to open it, Larxene suddenly grasped at his arm.

"Wait," she said abruptly. "If you don't mind... they just... they worked so hard on this!"

"Really," Axel whined, "You have no sense of theatrical timing."

"Oh, all right," Lexaeus sighed and crossed his arms, waiting for the finale to be over with.

Roxas stood nearby, watching the spectacle in horror as the climax came soaring to its pinnacle.

"I will love you..."

"I have to admit their casting is rather... what's the word I'm looking for," Vexen murmured.

"Effective?" asked Xaldin.

"Nightmare-inducing," Vexen corrected.

"Yes, I will love you..."

The Ukes lined up across the stage and threw their arms in the air, lifting their voices and singing as loudly as they could. Saïx fell back into Xemnas's arms and was dipped low to the stage.

"All right, here I go," Lexaeus said.

"I will love you! Until my dyyyyyy-iiiiing... daaaaaaay!"

With the final note, Lexaeus popped the lid off the Tupperware, releasing a beautiful purple shower of you knows into the air. They soared up above the stage like fireworks just as Demyx pulled a rope to dump a bucketful of sparkling confetti down on the cast. It was a rather spectacular sight—captured forever on film as Larxene hastily snapped a series of pictures.

Then, almost on cue, the you knows tumbled down from the top of the theater and towards the players. Each one collided with a misty blast of testosterone and the shock forced the Nobodies to freeze in place.

There were a few moments of silence.

Exactly 15.13 seconds later, Xemnas dropped Saïx with a tremendous THUMP on the stage floor.

There was a horrified, unison scream.

And then there came an uproarious burst of laughter from Axel and Larxene, quickly drowned out by an extremely loud chorus of Nobody voices, questioning, demanding and trying to reason what in the worlds was going on.

Xaldin chuckled.

"That..." Vexen murmured.

"Yes, Vexen?" asked Lexaeus.

Had Vexen a heart and were he capable of it, you would have seen him quickly reaching up to wipe away a single tear. "That was *beautiful*."

The adventure had wound to a close and all that was left was for the long explanations and epic recounting of the events depicted throughout the chapters of

this fanfic so far—even though Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus were in no mood to recap the trials and tribulations of the terrifying trip.

Fortunately for the three of them, it was Thursday night. Thursday night was traditionally Movie Night in The World That Never Was, and despite the shocking events of the day so far, none of Organization XIII was willing to miss it. It seemed that the vast majority of them would rather have tried to forget the situation they had woken up into, to pretend it was merely a bad dream.

Unfortunately for Organization XIII, the movie for the night was entitled "Axel and Larxene's Funniest Home Videos" and it consisted entirely of videotaped footage and slideshows of what the rest of the group had been up to during the big blank spot in their memories.

The screaming could be heard for miles in Dark City—and if you were really, really listening, as far as Twilight Town.

Having seen quite enough of their comrades in humiliating situations for a good long while, though, Xaldin, Vexen and Lexaeus opted out of movie night and instead decided to throw a celebratory social for just the three of them, in the big cozy armchairs around the fireplace in The Nonentity's Library, enjoying an extra large bottle of fine champagne and light refreshments.

"What does one say at the end of something like this?" pondered Lexaeus. "Something so unbelievable and terrible that the majority of us are going to pretend it never happened?"

"I am reminded of a saying," Xaldin quipped, "That the best part of an adventure is when it is over."

"I hope this will be the beginning of a nice, long vacation for the three of us," Vexen sighed.

"I'm off until the evening of the 21st," Xaldin replied. "Then I've been assigned to go torment some orphans in Agrabah."

"No such luck for me," Lexaeus lamented, "They have me down for a two-week stint in Atlantica next week."

"Oh, that's terrible," Vexen gaped.

"It's not so bad," Lexaeus shrugged, standing up and heading for the nearby table

where the refreshments were set. "Once you get used to the terrible controls, anyway."

Xaldin nodded in agreement and sighed. "A Nobody's work is truly never done."

"Cake, Xaldin?" Lexaeus asked.

"Please."

"And me as well," Vexen called.

Both his comrades turned to him with looks of utter shock on their faces—Lexaeus very nearly dropped the knife. "Really, Vexen?"

"Indeed," said the Chilly Academic, looking smug.

"I thought you didn't get along with the C-word anymore," Xaldin said, impressed.

"Whyever would that be?" Vexen replied. "Remind me once more, gentlemen, what is the number one thing to remember about Nobodies?"

"They have no hearts," Lexaeus answered.

"Yes," Vexen nodded. "And this, gentlemen, is Boston crème cake. Nobody said anything about lacking taste buds."

The sky was dark in The World That Never Was. It was looking to be a peaceful evening.

Or morning. Nobody could ever really tell.

THE END

THE SELF-INVOLVED MASTURBATORY AUTHOR'S NOTE

Oh my god I did it I FINISHED AAAAAHH ONCE MORE I'd like to apologize for the long, long wait between the last chapter and this one. The life of a college student is one of hardship and misery.

I can't believe it's over! This has been one hell of a ride, my lovely readers, and

what began as a stupid little flamebait parody I started in my free time has turned into the multi-chapter monstrosity that you see before you.

As a matter of fact, this story has taught ME a little something about badfic too. When I was starting off, it was my intention to piss off as many people as I could—but the great feedback I was getting told me a little something about the people reading my fics. You guys aren't stupid. You can spot worthless flamebait when you see it—and I was on the borderline between upsetting people and good-naturedly poking a little fun at them. In the end, I'm really not a trolly sort of person—and because I turned from being mean to being silly, I've had a lot more fun writing this and I think you guys have had more fun reading it as well. It's helped me hone my finely-tuned powers of sarcasm and given me lots of great practice.

Because this is my chapter and I can do what I want with it, I need to thank some people.

GEXT - My beloved beta reader, thank you for looking over all the chapters beforehand and keeping me in line. You even contributed portions of your acerbic wit in where mine was lacking. It wouldn't be the same without your awesome feedback.

DIXA - We've been friends since The Old Times and I continue to be blown away by what an awesome writer and an even more awesome person you are. Thanks for helping me hang in there... and inspiring me to stop procrastinating.

XELZ - I'm never so productive as when I'm plotting with you. Thanks for letting me bounce ideas off of you—I bet they bruised.

LYNX - Thank you for being my cheerleader. It's probably because of your nagging- I mean, ENCOURAGEMENT that I finished this at all. Thank you so much for your awesome comics. Bribery has never been so wonderful.

RII, KIA, RAINA - More people whose brains I picked and whose patience at my self-absorbed fic-related bitching I really appreciate. You guys all kick ass.

Finally, I need to thank each and every one of you who took the time to read my overly-long chapters, my rambling authors notes, the trollish first few chapters. I need to thank all of you who waited the MONTHS AND MONTHS AND MONTHS between updates, and always came back even when I thought I'd lost most of you to my own procrastination. To all of you who left the truly ridiculous number of reviews I've got. To everyone who wrote me emails, drew me fanfic and made me smile every time I opened my inbox. Heck, I want to thank everyone who contributes to fandom

in any way—even what we call "badfic". Thanks for being such good sports and finding it in yourselves to have a little laugh.

In the end, that's what I really hope—that TLS made you laugh. With it, at it, at yourselves, whatever. For in the words of Mel Brooks, "Comedy is the number one defense against the universe". I'd like to see the universe try to take us out NOW. HA-HA.

- Gexegee of Organization VI